

“Not alone and not in a home!”

The negotiation of later life as a cohousing group in
Berlin

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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March 2019

I, Jim Hudson, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the lived experience of the phenomenon of senior cohousing: a form of intentional, mutually supportive, community where groups of older people live in their own separate homes; have a formalised set of rules for living together; and share some common facilities. Central to the concept is that such communities are an alternative to social isolation, but also represents older people retaining control in later life. By using an ethnographic approach, spending several months primarily with one established group in the city of Berlin, I was able to better understand whether the original aims of such groups are achieved, and how they evolve and adapt in reality over many years together.

My findings are framed primarily through a consideration of the ageing process and identity; I argue that while the model is a practical response to the vicissitudes of ageing and later life, it also represents a rejection of stereotypes of 'old age' and an embracing of a new phase or 'third age' of life. For the group described in this study ('LAIc', or 'Living Alone in Community'), the enacted shared identity has faded in recent years, with members shifting their focus from the group to other, more individual concerns. I question whether this change from a 'third age' group identity to roles we might associate with more 'traditional' ageing such as grandparenting, is due to the breakdown of the group or changing priorities as they age.

LAIc provides a social structure in living together that, while not being the close-knit community some had originally hoped for, has offered much that is of value to its members, as a mutually supportive 'framework' more than a group of friends or family. A question mark remains however over how the group's ongoing loss of impetus might now play out, in sustaining the group into the future.

Impact Statement

How we live and support each other in later life is a question rising rapidly up the social and political agendas as the population of the industrialised world continues to age. It has become a key question for specific social policy objectives in the UK, with the need to fundamentally rethink the way we fund and approach social care, but also in wider social thinking about the demands an ageing population might place on every aspect of society, including housing.

My aim with this thesis is to add to a growing body of academic literature on the subject; drawing on the fields of both housing studies and socio-gerontology. Before, and throughout my study I have routinely attended and contributed to both academic and civil society conferences and workshops. My dissemination activity in the field of gerontology has already had a small impact as the subject is an unfamiliar one; housing, if covered, tends to focus on more passive care models for older age, as opposed to earlier intervention and alternative models that consider the importance of social interaction.

However, the subject of senior cohousing perhaps has a more direct relevance to housing and care policy makers and advocates. My own professional background in planning and housing development has helped me to begin presenting the research to different non-academic audiences. In the UK I intend to continue to build on my relationships with groups that include the UK Cohousing Network (who are building a base of academic research on the subject) and the Housing LIN (Learning Information Network), who bring together those involved in housing, health and social care, and act as a bridge between academic research and practitioners.

More recently, I have begun to disseminate findings from this study to a growing audience of academic and practitioners interested in community-led and alternative housing models. I've tailored the content for conferences and workshops, including a planning and housing forum hosted by the GLA. I have also presented to, and aim to begin working with, a number of larger architects' practices that I maintained contact with over the years, and whose work includes cohousing and other community-led housing projects. Several of these practices have begun sharing knowledge and an informal community of practice has arisen around such projects.

These practices and community led housing practitioners offer potential for a broader application of lessons I have learned through my research, but also to introduce the subject in greater depth. Their interest is not just in cohousing and senior cohousing projects, but in how housing projects for older people might respond to individual and societies changing needs by integrating some of the social and community focused aspects of cohousing.

Acknowledgements

First of all, a heartfelt thanks to all the members of the three groups in Berlin, especially to the LAiC group, who gave me so much of their time and entertained my endless questions politely and warmly, as well as accepting me accompanying them so often.

Thanks to my supervisors Russell Hitchings and Iqbal Hamiduddin, for their wisdom and otherworldly patience.

A special than you to Eva for going above and beyond the duties of a transcriber. While researchers are often concerned that something may be 'lost in translation' when others transcribe interviews, I gained some invaluable insights into cultural differences, but also at-times impenetrable accents.

Most of all to my wife Katie for living with my ups and downs through the last three-and-something years, and for agreeing to hang out in Berlin through most of 2017, while I disappeared off with my various senior cohousing groups.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A few years ago, towards the end of a long period living in Berlin, I became increasingly intrigued by a building project taking shape across the street from where I lived. An additional storey was being added to the traditional 19th century Berlin block, which appeared to be a hotel of some sort: two lines of rooms or small apartments which shared a very large communal living room and sun terrace. There was much talk amongst my neighbours that a group of wealthy older people had sold their individual homes elsewhere in Germany and moved in together as a kind of 'retirement commune'; one story I particularly liked was that the newly arrived residents had hired a stretched limo to take them all to a film opening at the Berlin film festival. Although some of these tales turned out to be embellished, I found the whole concept hugely appealing: to me it presented a new image of later life, in contrast with the dominance of media stories in both Germany and the UK that frame ageing populations largely in terms of isolation, loneliness and the increasing challenges for stretched social care services.

I later discovered the project to be an example of cohousing: a form of collaborative community that comprises individual homes clustered around common facilities, typically a common room and kitchen. Above all they are *intentional* communities, whose members have jointly committed to a shared ethos, to share a part of their lives in a group maintained through formal and informal social interaction (Fromm, 1991). While cohousing can be for people of any age, members of projects specifically created by and for older people – *senior cohousing* – also commit to support each other in later life, although stopping short of professional care. Advocates of the model claim that these small, proximate self-managed communities offer the chance of a more engaged, healthy and independent later life, and have a role to play in challenging to later life isolation and the numerous problems that spring from it (Brenton, 2013).

Yet while cohousing as a model for older people is often framed as a policy-friendly initiative in these terms, Maria Brenton (an academic and leading proponent of senior cohousing in the UK) sees it above all else as a fundamental rejection by older people of paternalistic models of

housing and care, in favour of maintaining agency in later life through collective action and community (Brenton, 1998). Thus, in seeking a deeper understanding of senior cohousing and its potential, it is essential to understand the motivations and experience of those actually living in it, rather than to project policy ambitions onto the model as simply another form of retirement or care housing. The overall aim of this thesis is to explore what we might learn from the lived experience of a fully established senior cohousing group, to gain a subtler understanding of its challenges and potential.

1.1 The wider context of senior cohousing

From its roots in Denmark in the 1970s, cohousing – including projects by older people – has spread widely elsewhere in Scandinavia and the Netherlands, and is witnessing growing popularity in the United States (Brenton, 2013). In the UK, although there are a number of senior cohousing groups in the development phase, as at the end of 2018 only one group – OWCH (Older Women’s CoHousing) – has actually completed their housing development and moved in together (UKCN, 2018; Brenton, 2017). Nonetheless, the ‘arrival’ of this group seems to have caught the public imagination; significant media interest has coincided with greater public discussion of the ageing population, especially around issues of care. In Germany, despite cohousing and other forms of collaborative and community-led housing being much more widespread (especially in Berlin), fully *senior* cohousing is surprisingly rare, although there are established projects dotted about the country (Fedrowitz, 2017; Wohnbund-Beratung NRW, 2017).

Established cohousing in the UK has thus far been created based on a number of different models, including co-operatives, community land trusts and other alternative approaches that in different ways are a response to the dominance of the private owner-occupier model. While the OWCH example was developed by a housing association, and includes a minority of rental units (Brenton, 2017), the majority of the residents are in effect owner-occupiers, each a leasehold owner of their home. In fact, a large majority of senior cohousing projects currently

tend to be self-funded by groups as owner-occupiers¹ – in part a reflection of the fact that a disproportionate amount of housing wealth is held by older people (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015). Yet as these authors note in their own case study, the development process – site identification, development costs, bridging loans and so on – mean that development of new senior cohousing projects remains extremely challenging and protracted. As a consequence, there has been growing interest in the so-called ‘retrofit’ model of cohousing, where a group might adapt and move into existing housing, or where an existing community might adapt and formalise their existing housing arrangements (Sanguinetti, 2015).

1.2 Exploring senior cohousing in Berlin

While the small (but growing) literature on senior cohousing has thus far covered a range of themes, there has been only a limited focus on the social dimensions of how fully-established groups actually work in practice, and the challenges of sustaining such groups in the long term. In the UK this reflects the paucity of established groups to study². From a personal perspective, pursuing these themes was a logical extension to a small qualitative study I was able to do as a Masters dissertation in 2015, with two senior cohousing groups in the south east of England, both of whom were at development stage. Having focussed on groups that were yet to actually move in together, I was keen to move on to exploring the lived experience of groups who had been together for several years. As this is not yet possible in the UK, Berlin was one location where I saw a potential to identify one or more groups that might be willing to become involved. This thesis is the result of the eight months that I spent primarily with one senior cohousing group in the city. The project goes by the name of ‘Living Alone in Community’³ but will be referred to by its acronym of ‘LAIc’ from here onwards.

While I had an early and more specific question of whether senior cohousing groups attract a certain kind of person through specific motivations, my overall aim was more open: to explore

¹ Own survey data, derived from personal contact or other research of groups self-identifying as ‘senior’ or older and listed in the UK Cohousing Directory (<https://cohousing.org.uk/information/uk-cohousing-directory/>) accessed up to November 2018.

² Acknowledging that a longitudinal study with OWCH has been begun as a collective project between the group and the LSE

³ I have used an English translation throughout, including the acronym, for reasons of anonymity that will be explained later in this chapter.

the question of how groups actually live, in the context of what senior cohousing is, or at least aims to be. The particular themes that interested me were how life unfolds in practice in light of the aim to be a community of companionship and mutual support, how such a community is maintained in the long term, and how the group supports its members in facing the vicissitudes of later life, i.e. physical and mental decline. Further, a dimension of senior cohousing that I had not set out to explore initially but that arose as an opportunity with the LAiC group, namely the possibilities and implications of retrofit in the context of ageing; in fact the group had moved in to an existing housing estate, and lived in a 'pepper-pot' arrangement of apartments around public circulation areas but who jointly rented an additional apartment as their shared space.

At a quite early stage of the fieldwork, it also became clear that the definitions of senior cohousing generally agreed by its advocates were strongly reflected in a set of aims and principles that the original members of LAiC had formulated when the group first came together, both as a manifesto and also for use as a promotional flyer. Thus, in exploring the lived experience in the context of the aims of senior cohousing, I have used the group's own more specific aims as a framing for each of the empirical chapters. The document also became a useful tool in my research as the members of the group were either familiar with it or were co-authors, so that unlike a set of academic research questions, I was able to use parts of the text as a useful point of reference with my interviewees.

The document itself, referred to by group's members as 'the flyer' but sometimes also referred to in this thesis as a 'manifesto', is written in a somewhat circuitous style, with themes sometimes repeated or overlapping (having scant regard for the researcher) but whose intentions are clear. As a useful scene-setter for the empirical chapters, the text is reproduced in Chapter 4, in translation, together with a distilled interpretation.

1.3 Senior cohousing through the lens of age and identity

In order to better understand the motivations and actions of the senior cohousing groups in Berlin, I sought to set aside the stereotypes of ageing in the context of housing and care that are often present in policy discourses – wealthy baby boomers resented by younger

generations, for instance, or individuals without agency who are to be pitied. Broader reading drew me primarily toward the field of social gerontology, which seeks to understand ageing and its attendant motivations and attitudes by treating ageing as a process that also becomes a part of our individual identity, rather than regarding older people as ‘other’. Key literature acknowledges a paradox: that as we age, we become no less ‘ageist’: older people share many of the same negative attitudes toward ageing as those who are younger, having internalised these throughout their own younger lives.

In particular, my approach was informed by key thinking about how we negotiate an older identity in terms of the social constructions of the *third age* and its attendant concept of a fourth age (Gilleard *et al.*, 2005). These are not life stages defined by chronological age – although the third age is usually viewed as beginning with retirement – but rather have been argued by Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard as being in a sense an assumed social identity that we aspire to, a ‘sunny upland’ of retirement closely associated with expectations of ‘ageing well’, a healthy, active post-work period that rejects previous negative images of later life (Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Higgs and Gilleard, 2015). The authors propose that the existence of a fourth age – a state of decrepitude, decline, a loss of agency and therefore in effect a loss of self – is a necessary corollary of the third, defined as much by a fear of these aspects of later life as much as an actual state of suffering them. Seen as such, the fourth age is a social imaginary, that plays an important role in how all of us think of and plan (or avoid planning) for how we will live our later years. I have drawn on the concept of these two ‘states’ as they became salient to my own research.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis proceeds (in Chapter 2) with a review of the relevant literature through several key strands, beginning with the literature on ageing and identity, specifically focussing on the shifts in societal perceptions of ‘old age’, and the concepts of a ‘third age’ and ‘fourth age’. Such concepts help to contextualise how the senior cohousing model does not simply exist as a collaborative housing response to increasing care needs or dependency in later life, but rather might represent a third age response, a statement of independence and reinvention by the baby boomer generation, in a way not experienced by previous generations. The chapter

moves on to explore the literature on how such issues play out in communities of older people. It moves on to a brief survey of how these issues are reflected in the changing nature of housing for older people, giving some context for the UK and Germany, as a counterpoint to understanding what those who join senior cohousing groups might be responding against. It also offers an appraisal of the literature on cohousing and senior cohousing to date, in light of the themes I explore in this thesis.

Chapter 3 describes the methods I used in my research approach to explore how the central theme of identity plays an important role in making and sustaining a group such as LAiC. In its second part, it moves on to provide some context for such projects in Berlin, the three cohousing groups that were considered for the fieldwork and explaining why LAiC formed the core study.

Chapters 5 to 8 form the core of my empirical research findings, and are structured to reflect the broad themes that emerged from my fieldwork, and framed in the context of LAiC's manifesto aims. Although the primary aim of the fieldwork was to explore the social relationships and their identities within the group at the *present moment*, the chapters can also be read as broadly chronological. Thus Chapter 5 begins by briefly exploring the formation of the project, moving on to individual members' backgrounds, housing pathways and the motivations that led to them joining the group. Chapter 6 begins by exploring LAiC's life together in its early stages, and how the social dynamic between members evolved and was negotiated as new members joined. It moves on to focus in greater depth how the group lives together in the present, and the various aspects of its social dynamics as they are negotiated *within* the group. Chapter 7 considers the effect of members' changing *external* social relationships – both familial and not – and their impact on the group. Finally, Chapter 8 addresses two closely related themes, reflecting on how the group's commitment to mutual care and support has begun to play out in the face of what we might consider as issues of the fourth age; and addressing issues of what I have termed 'succession', i.e. how the community might maintain its existence into the future, or indeed whether such a continuation is possible or desired.

The conclusion chapter draws these findings together to reflect more broadly on what the various findings might tell us about the potential for senior groups in the UK, and about the challenges that established groups might face as they age together.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

While the latter part of this chapter focuses on the literature that relates specifically to senior cohousing, it begins with an exploration of the possible lenses which help in interpreting the various findings generated from the grounded approach taken to the research. The primary lens considered is that of the socio-gerontological understanding of identity and the ageing process, in order to contextualise senior cohousing and the lived experience of groups as something more complex than simply a subset of the broader cohousing model. In addition, other key lenses are considered, namely those of the role of forms of social capital and networks, alongside concepts of reciprocity and neighbouring support in later life.

I start therefore by seeking an understanding of how societal perceptions of old age have changed over recent decades, with new generations of older people seeing themselves differently, and expressing different expectations of later life. This 'third age' is discussed both as a context to better understand the motivations to join (or establish) such groups, but also as having potential relevance to how an older cohousing group lives. This concept recognises ageing as an evolving social process rather than as a category of person. The same section similarly considers a *fourth* age, as in one sense the stage of cognitive and physical decline, but also as a corollary of the third: as a social imaginary built around the fear of these things, and which is implicitly rejected or avoided in the pursuit of the third age. While on one hand senior cohousing might seem to have little in common with these concepts, being ostensibly about the recognition of the vicissitudes of later life and planning for them, as my fieldwork progressed I came to suspect that the individuals involved were not immune to the thinking and behaviours of wider society, and that even for such forward-thinking groups, tensions exist between ambition around ageing and actuality.

The latter part of the chapter turns to examine the literature on cohousing and senior cohousing itself: firstly in terms of definitions and the scope of the literature to date, but with a primary focus on what the writing on the subject has said about the lived experience of such projects. In doing so I draw on the ideas of how we position and negotiate our identities in

later life as discussed earlier in the chapter. The chapter concludes by identifying the gaps in the literature and making a case for this research.

2.2 Ageing and identity in later life

Changing perspectives on later life

Few would argue that the boundaries of what constitutes 'old age' in western society have shifted significantly over recent decades. Where reaching retirement age might once have been regarded largely as a precursor to a period of rapid decline and demise, our expectations now of life in our sixties and beyond are more likely to be of continued agency, activity and leisure. The academic literature has long been engaged in exploring this shift, questioning the so-called functionalist view, that reaching a certain chronological age is a marker of an unavoidable period of dependency, economic and social disengagement, and physical and cognitive decline (Townsend, 1981; Olson, 1982). These critiques have deepened to question of the nature of old age, arguing that later life has been overly pathologised and that the concept of old age and its meaning are as much an outcome of how society perceives or treats its older members, than they are a matter of chronological or biological determination (Walker, 1981; Estes *et al.*, 1982). At the same time, it is argued that wider cultural attitudes around ageing in western society, are not quite as progressive or inclusive of this 'new ageing' as we might think (Binstock, 2010; Baars, 2012; North and Fiske, 2012), and that more importantly social policy remains entrenched in outdated notions of ageing, with older people often being forced to submit to a medicalised, infantilising model of later life if they wish to receive health or care services (Oldman, 2002; Nicholson, 2012; Calnan *et al.*, 2013).

I have begun by outlining these discussions because I perceive that from a sociological perspective, senior cohousing is located in this territory: at the heart of the concept is a desire to maintain independence and autonomy in later life as a response to the limited retirement housing options perceived as available, but also perhaps a greater desire to avoid the dependency and loss of personhood of the care home (Brenton 2001; Glass and Skinner, 2012; Stevens, 2013). Further, advocates of the model (as will be discussed later) often frame senior cohousing as a self-generated positive response to societal ageism and assumptions about the independence of older people.

The third age, successful ageing, and the rejection of 'oldness'

If it is the case that older people are faced with socially embedded ageism, recent decades have seen an alternative perspective develop that seems to challenge such prejudice with new ideas of what later life can be. The concept of a *third age* is one that arguably exists more in the public consciousness than as academic theory, and was widely popularised by the polemical work of Peter Laslett in the late 1980s (Gilleard, 2008). Laslett promoted this third age as a 'new' post-retirement life stage, as a period that offers opportunities for personal fulfilment and productive activity to those who find themselves freed from the bonds of work and child rearing, but who are yet to suffer the physical or mental decline threatened by 'very old' age (Laslett, 1989). Although criticised for its uneven mix of academic rigour and populism (cf Siegel, 1990), the appeal of such ideas might be argued as having helped return 'agency' to a social group – those who have reached retirement age – and had previously been regarded as no longer valued in western society because they were no longer of *economic* value (Higgs, 2013).

It does seem that our notional boundaries of what 'old age' is have shifted; it has become a truism that each of us recalls how, for instance, our grandparents seemed much older than our parents, or indeed ourselves, at a given age. People in their fifties, sixties and even seventies no longer regard themselves as 'old', rejecting ageist stereotypes and embracing the thinking of the third age and its call to 'age well' (Biggs *et al.*, 2007; Gilleard, 2008). Critics of the third age concept argue that its appeal is that it in some senses encourages a denial of our underlying fears about ageing, decline and death (see for instance Gilleard, 2008; Gilleard and Higgs, 2010; Higgs, 2013; Tulle-Winton (1999). This is an acceptance that while social gerontology has broadly challenged the implications of structured dependency and ageist stereotypes, a growing focus on 'positive' or 'successful ageing', of older people attempting to confound such attitudes through the pursuit of active, independent lifestyles. Gilleard and Higgs (2010) also suggest the third age concept implies a rejection of 'oldness' as a 'condition' that others might suffer or perform – previous generations, or even those of similar chronological age – who have 'failed in the fight' against old age. The same authors (2002, 2010, 2014), have argued that the power of the ideas of the third age and successful ageing have permeated not only

popular but academic writing which, they claim, regards acceptance of the marginalization of older people – for example the status of ‘pensioner’ – as moral or personal failings, and that:

... ageing has changed from a process once described as that of ‘structured dependency’ to a third age arena, where agency and effort are always expected, not so much through paid employment as by working tirelessly on lifestyle, leisure and consumption.

Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: xii

This rejection of ‘old age’ by older people themselves has been explored in a number of studies (for instance, Hurd, 1999; Jones, 2006; Degnen, 2007), each of which suggests a more complex negotiation of a third age identity, one that necessitates a distancing from others who have somehow failed to maintain an ‘appropriate’ identity. Laura Hurd’s study of an older people’s social centre in Canada describes how a group jointly constructs an identity defined by what its members insist they are not: ‘old folk’, situating themselves instead as what Hurd terms the ‘not old’ (Hurd, 1999). The terms echo Neugarten’s differentiation between the ‘old-old’ and the ‘young-old’, broadly based on age categories (Neugarten, 1974). Yet in Hurd’s study, the self-definition of ‘not old’ is ambiguous, and not based on chronological age; one ‘not old’ member, at 90, is cited as an inspiration to the group. The key attributes of ‘not old’ membership instead include remaining busy and physically active, and taking pride in confounding ageist expectations. The group in Hurd’s study externalises ‘oldness’ to those they regard as in worse positions, such as those in nursing homes. These projections evoke Hochschild’s ‘poor dear’ hierarchy developed in her own study (1973: 58-63), in which older people regard themselves as ‘better off’ than (and in a separate category from) those less fortunate; everyone ultimately holds someone else to be a ‘poor dear’. If this appears wholly negative – a kind of age-based schadenfreude – it should be noted that Hurd and Hochschild’s analyses both support Heckhausen and Brim’s (1997) assertion that social downgrading, the idea that ‘others are worse than me’, in itself helps in dealing with the negative aspects of ageing, a finding that they report as especially prevalent when an individual is worried about issues around their own health.

Despite this apparently positive aspect, there are negatives inherent in the externalising of 'oldness' onto others when those others are a part of the same community. In Hurd's group, the 'not old' label is withheld from sedentary, uninvolved, older individuals, who are regarded by the group as in some way 'at fault', failing to take part in the project to resist ageist stereotypes and the 'misconceptions of experts and younger generations'. She also describes members' individual attempts to conceal sometimes significant illnesses and conditions, and to make light of negative aspects of their own ageing, in order to maintain acceptance within the group as examples of successful ageing.

Similarly, in an ethnographic study of a group of older people based around a community centre in the north of England, Degnen (2007) relates how one woman is ostracised due to apparent mental confusion and physical lack of control. This study suggests that 'oldness' is attributed by the group because of a failure of 'proper social comportment' by the individual – an ostracising of a troublemaker – rather than old age. An individual who is the focus of this 'ageism by the aged' is even found to adjust their own behaviour to fit with the ageist views. Degnen admits that stigma is attached to individuals facing disability or mental decline in the community (or rather, to those who share the physical space of the community), with those regarded as 'a bit senile' being excluded; and finds that remaining 'young' is as much to do with conformity with, and membership of, the group as any other factor.

Such malleable concepts of 'old' and the projection of 'oldness' onto others are possible because, as previously argued, oldness is not directly related to chronological and physical age, but is rather a social construction. All of us – including those in later life – differentiate ourselves from 'the elderly' as a separate group, defined by a set of intangible criteria somehow separated from purely chronological age (Furstenberg, 1989). Three main reasons for this can be drawn out of writing on the subject. The first, argue Weiss and Lang (2009) is that age-related decline, loss, and the eventual certainty of death threaten our sense of self in later life; that understandably, ageing adults attempt to maintain this sense of self by trying *'to avoid the negative consequences associated with their age group membership by distancing themselves from [that] age group'*.

But a second reason is that age prejudice and ‘otherisation’ of old age are behaviours we learn throughout our lives, and thus remain a part of our identity into later life. Rejection of ‘the elderly’ by older people themselves is understandable, given that throughout our lives we are confronted with deeply negative images of ageing (Bytheway, 2005; Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). Dobbs *et al.* (2008) describing the reinforcement of age-stratification from childhood, through images of ‘a homogenous group that is dependent, lonely, frail, and incapable of socialization’. Age prejudice is thus so embedded that older adults often hold the same negative attitudes about their own cohort as young adults (Heckhausen and Brim, 1997). Such attitudes remain prevalent into later life, it is argued, in part because of the continuation of (often) enforced retirement, and segregation of older adults from wider society (Levy, 2003). Hummert *et al.* (1994) note that although we add more categories of age as we grow older, stereotypes of ‘oldness’ persist, built up over a lifetime of socially constructed ageism. Simply having been around for more years does not mean a sudden rejection of age-based prejudices as people reach say, 60, a reason perhaps that few of us regard ourselves as ‘old’ in later life.

Thirdly, these negative connotations of later life mean that when we ourselves age, our sense of wellbeing is challenged in the way that it might be as members of any stigmatised group; Logan *et al.* (1992: 452) found that identifying as ‘old’ was a reflection of being less happy about one’s own identity, and that ‘old’ or even ‘middle aged’ were often perceived as negative terms even by those who identified as them.

In summary, it is apparent that the image of a third age (albeit a life phase not necessarily known by this term beyond academic writing) as a new period of post-retirement productivity, leisure and wellbeing conceals a more complex picture; that by taking such ideas at face value we ignore the complexities – and tensions around – ageing and ageism. If we view society as structurally ageist, it is logical that as each of us reaches the later stages of life we continue to carry with us the ageism that we have learned. Further, it seems the way that a person negotiates the ageing process – including an understandable and even necessary rejection of ‘old age’ as an identity that applies to others – plays out in specific ways within communities of older people, and that it is likely therefore to be a key aspect of how senior cohousing groups also negotiate an identity together.

The baby boomers, 68ers and the post-war generation

While thus far I have focussed on social shifts in how we think about old age in the abstract, it is also important to acknowledge that there is a specific generational component to these changing attitudes, notably from the generation from which those currently living in senior cohousing schemes are largely drawn. These are the so-called 'baby boomer generation': those born in a demographic peak from the end of the Second World War and the immediate period after it, and whose ages now span from retirement into their 70s (Longino, 2005; Phillipson, 2008). It is argued however that while the term 'baby boomer' describes a quantifiable demographic phenomenon, it is as much used as a shorthand to describe a cohort that grew up through a period of intense social change, and which has markedly separated them from the behaviour and attitudes of previous generations (Thomas and Blanchard, 2009; Pruchno, 2012). Paul Higgs maintains that the idea of the boomer generation remains closely tied to:

... the changing nature of what old age has become and how it has been successively changed from being simply retirement from the labour force to becoming a distinct part of a more culturally and socially diverse later life. Although such a change has been underpinned by changes in life expectancy and in the health of older people during the twentieth century, a more profound change has been the continual raising of standards of living that those in retirement have experienced.

Higgs, 2013: 272

It might therefore be posited that the rise of such a diverse and socially progressive generation would pose a challenge to socially-embedded ageist attitudes. Indeed, Minichiello *et al.* (2000) regard the boomers as less accommodating of age prejudice than previous cohorts of older people, while Edmunds and Turner perceive a generation resistant to '*previous societally-entrenched views about old-age-appropriate behavior*' (2002: 31). Others disagree. Allen (2010: 23), makes the case that the boomers, as the first generation for whom consumption equates with the notion that all challenges have 'solutions', are perhaps more ageist than previous generations in their desire to retain the image of youth, reflecting on a generation who themselves reject stigmatized labels of 'oldness' to note that '*... the pervasiveness of*

negative stereotypes of being “old” mitigate against such activism, for in order to fight ageism, there needs to be some ownership of the identity of “old”.

To be accurate, it should be noted that Germany had no comparable birth peak in the immediate post-war years, and the term is not in general use. Nonetheless, a number of authors in the socio-gerontological literature on the boomer generation use the term widely, to refer to the experience of North America and Western Europe (cf Biggs, 2007; Leach *et al.*, 2008). Strong comparisons can be made between the generational attitudes of those who grew up in the aftermath of the war both in the UK and (West) Germany; of the latter generation many now regard themselves as ‘68ers’, a reflection of a coming-of-age during the radical political upheavals of the late 1960s, even though a majority played no role in protest movements and have sometimes adopted the moniker retrospectively (von der Goltz, 2011).

The baby boomer generation has been briefly considered here as a secondary context to those currently involved in senior cohousing projects. While Labit (2015) observes that the cohousing concept predates the rise of the boomers by several decades, she links this generation strongly to the later socio-economic development of cohousing (both specifically for older people and generationally mixed) and to the rapid population ageing due in part to the boomer peak. Many of those members are likely to identify to varying degrees as part of this particular generation, regarding themselves quite consciously as being quite different from their own parents, and as having different expectations of greater self-fulfilment and self-determination in later life. While the boomer generation (and the equivalent generational cultures in Germany) are most closely identified with the ‘invention’ of the third age, it is important to differentiate the two; the third age remains the dominant framing for my own research as less attached to a particular cohort. In fact it is essential to the sustainability of senior cohousing that it survives those currently in post-retirement and is taken up by succeeding generations.

The fourth age

While the concept of the third age emphasizes a more positive, self-determined image of later life, many argue that the aspirational third age risks pushing a more balanced or realistic understanding of the issues of very late life to the margins: of implicitly denying a fourth age.

If a third age is defined as much by our attitudes and efforts, as socially constructed as much as by chronological age, then what defines a fourth age? While Laslett (1989) sees the third and fourth ages as being in binary opposition – failure in the first places the person in the second – Baltes (1998) draws the concept back to chronological age and its attendant likelihoods of physical and mental decline. Higgs and Gilleard (2015) take the view however, that while we can think of the third age as a cultural field, we can also treat the fourth age as a ‘social imaginary’. This is not to suggest that the physical and mental exigencies of later life are not real, but they argue that the construction of a third age that is defined through those enjoying a healthy and active retirement phase of their lives has helped to marginalise the ‘other’, negative aspects of later life, and at the same time has thus engendered greater fear of a fourth age – a state of ‘deep old age’, a time of frailty, dependency, and ultimately a loss of self, of what they describe as ‘a loss of subjectivity’ (2015: 11).

Gilleard and Higgs’ view of the fourth age (from the literature previously cited) is thus neither one of chronological age, nor defined by particular conditions or illnesses, but is instead a joint construction by medical professionals (through the categorising of individuals as ‘frail’) and the fear among those enjoying their third age. Indeed most of us fear institutionalisation, of going into, or rather being placed into, the dreaded ‘care home’. The idea that the fourth age is as much something constituted by our fear of the final late stages of life is reinforced by the same authors consideration of the fourth age as a kind of social and cultural ‘black hole’ and its attendant concept of the ‘event horizon’, a line crossed from which there is no return:

To many people in or approaching “later” life, the position of those in the fourth age can be likened to that of an object that has strayed too close to the event horizon and has now gone over it, beyond any chance of return. Equally, no light shines back once the event horizon is traversed. [...] The fear of the fourth age is a fear of passing beyond any possibility of agency, human intimacy, or social exchange, of becoming impacted within the death of the social, a hyper-reality from which there is no reality to return.

While the social dynamics around actual practical support and reciprocity will be examined in the empirical chapters, I am interested in the fourth age social imaginary as a *perception* of the loss of independence, and of the loss of self-identity implicit in ‘going into care’. West *et al.*

(2016), in a study of wellbeing among residents living in an ExtraCare housing development in the UK, argue that understanding the dialectic of the third and fourth ages is an essential framing for the exploration of group identity in what they regard as the 'third age public spaces and ideals' of that particular form of housing. The authors recognise that while cognitive and physical impairment in later life is obviously a reality, they use the third and fourth age concepts to present a subtler negotiation of identity within a community that echoes Degnen's (2007) construction of ageing identity by a group in part by individuals distancing themselves from others' old age. I aim to draw on the concept of the fourth age here not only to consider actual decline in cognitive or physical health, but as the context for how senior cohousing members might think about (or fear) their late life ageing, and respond to it through the shared life and identity of the group.

2.3 Other theoretical lenses

While ageing identity and the concepts of the third and fourth age are drawn on in this thesis as the primary lens in examining the findings, it is important to acknowledge other approaches that have potential relevance. This section focuses firstly on the concept(s) of ‘social capital’ as it has been employed in different ways relevant to the context of senior cohousing, before moving on to consider other lenses, drawing together ideas relating to the social ties of neighbourhood and how these relate to mutual support and reciprocity in later life.

Theories of social capital as framing the concept of senior cohousing

The term social capital has in recent years been extended beyond sociology and academia into public policy, becoming an increasingly nebulous term in the process. It is useful therefore to briefly outline the concept’s differing definitions, before considering how these might relate to social networks and potential isolation in later life, as well as to senior cohousing specifically. Summarising very broadly, social capital could be viewed as having two separate definitions (Portes, 2000; DeFilippis, 2001). The first stems from Loury’s (1977) critique of the narrow understanding of ‘capital’ in neoclassical economic theory and that equality of opportunity rested not just on economic capital but that:

An individual’s social origin has an obvious and important effect on the amount of resources that is ultimately invested in his or her development. It may thus be useful to employ a concept of “social capital” to represent the consequences of social position in facilitating acquisition of the standard human capital characteristics.

Loury, 1977: 176

At the same time, Pierre Bourdieu was developing a related theory of social capital in the pursuit of better understanding the reproduction of social class, and which views social capital as closely intertwined with economic and other forms of capital – including the ‘cultural’ capital (in his context a form of capital generated through educational opportunity) – employed by

individuals in the reproduction of class advantage (Bourdieu, 1985). A second, arguably quite separate meaning of social capital was popularised – largely beyond academia – primarily by Robert Putnam (1993, 1995), who used the term to describe a kind of social resource possessed (or lacked) by groups or whole sectors of society, and generated through civic trust, activity and institutions. This latter understanding has been adopted by governments and policy-makers in community development to the extent that even two decades ago, one critic was able to note that: *‘In the debate over poor neighborhoods and the ills of society as a whole, social capital has become something of a wonder drug’* (Chupp, 1999: 2).

The concept of social capital – or from a wider perspective ‘alternative capitals’ (i.e. forms of capital other than economic) – has been applied only to a limited extent thus far in the field of cohousing studies (Sargisson, 2007; Jarvis, 2015; Rui, 2016). Jones (2017) draws on a Bourdieusian understanding of social and cultural capitals to explore the role these played in the life stories and housing pathways of older members of cohousing groups in England, in searching for commonalities in individual journeys toward membership of such groups. From a slightly different perspective, Hudson (2017), takes a more process-oriented approach, to consider how individuals employed – or negotiated between – different forms of capital (including economic) in the formation of two senior cohousing groups in the south-east of England. He suggests that the attempt to create such projects in these two cases represented economic and cultural forms of capital being ‘exchanged’ for the social capital – strong supportive social ties – that individual members perceived they lacked, and placed greater value on in later life. Both approaches lend themselves in particular to a better understanding of what makes it possible for individuals to form senior cohousing groups through a consideration of all forms of capital, and sheds light on the process of group formation and development.

The second definition of social capital – as *‘the way in which people participate in their society and the forms of social bonding that take place’* (Pichler and Wallace, 2007: 423) – might seem to relate more closely both to the motivations in joining a group, and to a need to form a strong social connection with others in later life by individuals who feel they both need, and lack this. As will be discussed in 2.4, below, the aim of the senior cohousing movement is that the model represents above all a response to a lack of social connection and support among older people:

that senior cohousing might replace networks of social bonds that are perceived to be lacking for many in later life.

Ruiu (2016) draws primarily on this second interpretation of social capital in her own cohousing study of several groups (in England and Italy), using Putnam's (2000: 22) concept of 'bonding' and 'bridging' forms of social capital, and also drawing on Granovetter's (1973) comparable model of 'strong' and 'weak' social connections. Putnam described bonding ties as existing in dense close-knit networks, and good for 'getting by', with bridging ties — using social connections to reach beyond a given group — as crucial for 'getting ahead'. Ruiu concludes that the cohousing projects she studies offer a perfect combination of strong 'bonding' social capital within the group, allied with effective 'bridging' social capital in pursuing relationships with the community beyond it. Yet while she acknowledges that conflict might occur within such groups, she implicitly rejects the idea that members (especially those in later life) might be seeking strong social bonds in a particular location (i.e. the cohousing's immediate neighbourhood) where they feel it is lacking for them.

Other writers on cohousing and intentional community (cf. Brenton, 2008; LaFond *et al.* 2012), although not drawing explicitly on concepts of social capital or forms of social ties, follow Ruiu in emphasizing the importance of engagement with the wider local community. In part this is as a response to critiques that cohousing risks becoming a form of gated community (Fromm, 2012; Chiodelli, 2015a, 2015b; Ruiu, 2015). Although not always a part of the cohousing definition, it is important to note it here to acknowledge the particular debate around senior cohousing and fears that it is more at risk of becoming physically and socially exclusive (Scott-Hunt, 2009; Rogers, 2014). Sargisson (2007), in considering intentional communities more broadly, in effect takes a more critical view, using the idea of 'estrangement' to suggest an inherent tension between social bonds within the group and with others outside it: that in fact a degree of separation from outside society is a necessary pay-off to ensure the community thrives at an early stage. Whether a negotiation or tension is unavoidable — between building strong bonds within the group and relationships, bridging or bonding, with others beyond the group — is a theme that will be considered in Chapter 7.

Who cares? The rise in importance of non-kin supportive relationships for older people

Although there has long been an extensive literature on kinship support in later life, the challenges of an ageing population and falling birth rates in the developed world are increasingly reflected in a substantial and growing literature that explores the role of non-kin informal support from and between friends and neighbours. Van Groenou (2016) notes for instance that across Europe, greater longevity, fewer children, and regressive care policy reforms are putting more pressure on both kin and non-kin in informal supporting roles. Gardner (2011) and Browning and Sims (2015) however both note a clear trend that our personal communities are shifting away from family members and increasingly toward a greater proportion of non-kin. Gray observes the proportion of friendship and support from other elders as increasing (in a UK study), noting that while:

...advancing age reduces the chances of having a non-kin 'best friend' [...] elders increasingly depend for social support on friendships that they themselves develop.

Gray, 2009: 28

In the same study, Gray draws on both senses of social capital previously discussed – as both an individual and collective resource – in further observing that while kin remain the key source of support in later life (in the UK), building local connections with non-kin and frequency of meeting people had a greater positive impact on extent of support than partnership status or on having children nearby. In summary, while individual circumstances, social networks and neighbourhoods may vary greatly, non-kin play an increasing role in the lives and supportive relationships of older people.

Forms of neighbouring support

While many studies of supportive non-kin relationships for older people describe across a spectrum ranging from simple friendship between neighbours to (often unreciprocated) informal carer roles (cf. Harris, 2008; Gray, 2009; Gardner, 2011; Lester *et al.*, 2012; van Dijk *et al.*, 2013; Browning and Sims, 2015; Grime, 2018), it is important to acknowledge that there is common agreement on a broad set of definitions that aims to quantify or measure the extent

of social support exchanged between neighbours. *Neighbouring* as a measure has been established by Kahn & Antonucci (1980), and Weiss (1982) as dividing into three aspects of support, summarising these as: functional/instrumental, personal/emotional, and informational. Although these were further developed by others (e.g. Farrell *et al.*, 2004), Glass (2016), in a study of three senior cohousing communities in the US, further developed these into thirteen categories, which together with a number of other indicators she used to assess the success of such projects in promoting the social resources of their members. Her definitions are worth quoting here, as useful differentiations for examining the nature of social support in my own research, albeit mine was not a quantitative or comparative approach:

Eight of the [...] types of help listed in the survey were instrumental: providing rides, lending/borrowing things, helping with household maintenance, responding to an emergency, preparing meals, picking up mail, looking out for others on a daily basis, and providing hands-on care. Three tasks reflected emotional support: going with a neighbor to a doctor's appointment, visiting at the hospital, and listening and providing support when needed.

Glass, 2016: 560

Although Glass went on to also describe a further category of informational, it is the distinction between instrumental and emotional forms of support that will be used and referred back to in later chapters.

Reciprocity

Gray (2008), in noting that it is most often kin who provide support to elders without the expectation of reciprocity, poses the question '*of how this can be secured when personal communities are becoming less kin-based.*' (2008: 29), given that frail or ill older people living in the community may increasingly depend on unreciprocated support from others who are non-kin.

The issue of reciprocity in non-kin relationships is a complex one; Wentowski (1981) notes how often 'instrumental' reciprocal relationships in supporting older members of a community

– straightforward exchanges of items or favours that require symmetry of reciprocity – in themselves require little closeness and in fact can be a way of maintaining a certain distance. But she also notes how such relationships can, alternatively, often form the basis of deeper, deferred or ‘generalised reciprocity’ (1981: 604) where a sense of obligation begins to replace any expectation of repayment, in many cases moving toward what she refers to as ‘fictive kin’, and where a sense of moral obligation is maintained as it might be with actual kin.

Nocon and Pearson (2000) agree, finding (in a study in northern England) that such deeper relationships often begin as small neighbourly instrumental arrangements that become something both more involved and less immediately reciprocal. Importantly, they report that rarely does such support arise only in response to a major health crisis: that at such times it is essential that a relationship has previously been built up. Barker (2002), and Grime (2018), both support this, the latter observing in her own study that where help was given it was based on pre-existing relationships, albeit that needs – and support in response – might increase over time. Notably, her respondents, both carers and cared-for, tended not to regard this as a care-carer relationship, but as a form of ‘delayed reciprocity’, with benefits to the carer of that include *‘feeling good from doing something worthwhile, ties of affection, being appreciated, giving back to the community [or] a pathway into paid work’* (Grime, 2018: 183). Numerous authors note though the potential challenges to such relationships though on the part of the receiver (cf. Fine and Glendenning, 2005; Gardner 2011; Lester *et al.*, 2012); that a recipient of care risks feeling overly dependent, of becoming a ‘burden’ on the unpaid carer. Often the issue remains unresolved, with informal caring and support relationships remaining complex and often unequal. As Nocon and Pearson note:

One of the key issues to emerge relates to the fuzzy boundary between neighbourliness and friendship on the one hand, and ‘care’ on the other. The resentment that some [care givers] express about arrangements indicates that they feel they have been pulled across a normative boundary.

Nocon and Pearson, 2000: 364

While Machielse and Hortulanus (2014) suggest that socialising and companionship are an intrinsic part of maintaining self-worth on the part of the recipient of caring, it is unsurprising that, given such challenges, a significant amount of social support and care is given between older people themselves; Van Dijk *et al.* (2012) for instance found, from studies in the Netherlands, that everyday commitments to help and support: ... *'occurred naturally among neighbours, [and that] neighbour support-givers consistently emphasised carefully watching over each other'* (2012: 155). But again, they note that, when so much care is among older people themselves, often themselves increasingly frail:

Overburdened neighbour support-givers indicated that they receive no professional support and feel morally obligated to continue their support. Thus, their own well-being can be jeopardised.

Van Dijk *et al.*, 2012: 156

Their observation touches on an issue that relates very directly to cohousing groups of older people: the need to maintain a range of ages in such groups and matters of 'succession' discussed in Chapter 8. Gray draws the issue back to social capital and social networks, stressing that social capital 'held' by networks of older people is in one crucial sense deficient, with a *'... need to develop 'bridging' social capital in the form of contacts with younger people who will outlive them.'* (2009: 28).

In reality, relationships for most of us in later life are likely to remain varied, partial and complex, and involve a mix of kin and non-kin; Browning and Sims (2015) observe that roles are often complimentary, with neighbours and friends providing the proximate support not always possible for geographically dispersed family members. Nocon and Pearson (2000) remind us of the importance of 'caring for the carer' (2000: 360), relating an example of non-kin carers (often themselves older women) who are in turn supported by their own family members, representing a far more complex picture of care than purely instrumental examples might suggest.

Summary

This section has briefly considered various ideas and concepts that relate to the social connection, support and reciprocity that closely relate to an exploration of senior cohousing; a model which seeks to substitute proximate, strong social bonds with other non-kin in light of a perception that these are increasingly lacking in alter life.

2.4 The cohousing and senior cohousing literature

This section reviews the literature on senior cohousing to date, also drawing on the wider cohousing literature where relevant, acknowledging that while the two are not mutually exclusive models, neither is senior cohousing (I argue) simply a subset of the whole. It begins with a definition of cohousing's key attributes in order to contextualise its relationship with projects created by older groups, before going on to briefly summarise the scope of the literature to date on senior cohousing. My primary focus is to examine the extent to which the existing literature has addressed the social dynamics and lived experience of senior cohousing in the context of the ideas of ageing identity previously discussed, and especially whether the senior cohousing aims of mutual support, reciprocity have been considered through this lens.

Defining cohousing

Cohousing has been characterised as different from other forms of intentional communities or communes, in that it comprises both individual households and common shared facilities and spaces (Krofkors, 2012). It stands distinctively separate – in terms of definition if not necessarily in practice – from such forms as communes (communal living without individual apartments) or co-operatives (usually a definition relating to ownership) (Vestbro, 2010). But while there is no universally agreed definition for the term, most literature emphasizes cohousing as something more than a particular spatial design, where the physical architecture exists to support the social commitment that is central to the cohousing concept. As Michael LaFond, a key figure in Berlin's collaborative housing culture defines it:

CoHousing emphasizes collaborative and self-managed social architectures. Residents share a vision of community-oriented living, developed through cooperative planning and management, and supported through common daily experiences. Specially designed spaces and coordinated activities encourage communication within housing projects and interaction with surrounding neighbourhoods.

LaFond et al., 2012: 17

Helen Jarvis further emphasizes the social commitment as the defining feature of cohousing over other collaborative models:

... the micro-social practices that self-organising resident groups engage in over the years that it takes to build a co-housing community. This 'social architecture' is what distinguishes co-housing from superficially similar shared-space neighbourhoods.

Jarvis (2015: 93)

It is however possible to draw out a set of key elements that must exist for a community to be defined as cohousing, both from the academic literature but also from the various regional cohousing movements (for instance the UK Cohousing Network, 2018). Drawing on Fromm (1991), McCamant and Durrett (2004), Krokfors (2010) and in the UK, Field (2011), a working definition that is specific to cohousing can be summarised as a housing community that is:

- designed in order to create an *intentional* neighbourhood;
- comprised of self-contained accommodation, supplemented by a common space and facilities that are shared and used by all the community's households;
- fully controlled and managed by its residents (through a non-hierarchical structure);
- of a suitable size and scale to support a viable community dynamic – ideally not less than 10 and no more than 40 adults;
- distinct from concepts such as communes, in not requiring a shared economy (although savings may be made to the group through sharing facilities).

Many writers (for instance Bresson and Denèfle, 2015) place environmental awareness and minimising of resources as a further necessary element, although others note that while cohousing projects are very often designed and run with ecological principles in mind (Droste

and Knorr-Siedow, 2012), this aspect is by no means universally agreed as an essential element. Sharing of resources more generally is agreed as an important part of a cohousing community, but again is not the focus here, albeit that Jarvis (2011) describes how the sharing of resources, time and space, form overlapping infrastructures of reciprocity in any given project; in short that there is rarely a clear distinction between sharing of physical resources and the social architecture. Another key aspect of the life of such groups that many advocates regard as essential, is the regular coming together of the group socially in the shared space, and usually based around the preparation and eating of food together (cf Field, 2011; McCamant and Durrett, 2004).

Finally, a note should be included here about the term 'cohousing' itself. 'Collaborative housing' (also 'collaborative communities') is often used rather than 'cohousing', by those who argue that the latter term is too exclusive and tightly defined (Fromm, 1991; Droste, 2015; Tummers, 2015a). Even the exact spelling seems to lack consistency in literature from around the world, with 'CoHousing', 'co-housing' and 'cohousing' all in use. For consistency, this thesis uses the uncapitalised *cohousing*.

In summary, although there are a set of criteria that are broadly accepted as defining cohousing, and which invariably include the need for self-contained homes, supplemented by a shared common space and facilities, the social architecture is essential; the other aspects of cohousing exist primarily to support and sustain this social existence.

Cohousing and senior cohousing: two fundamentally different models?

The social dimension emphasized above is arguably even more essential to the concept of senior cohousing, yet cohousing for older people is often approached from a different direction than cohousing as a whole, both in terms of the literature, but also by those motivated to join senior cohousing groups. On one hand, it is not unusual for senior cohousing to be situated as a subset of cohousing as a whole, and thus as part of a broader utopian search for new forms of collaboration and ownership (cf Sargisson, 2010). Indeed, Scanlon and Fernandez Arrigoitia (2015) comment that much of the literature so far has tended to place senior cohousing in the 'communitarian paradigm' of collaborative housing to an excessive degree, suggesting that the

economics and practical motivations that drive the senior model make it something substantively different from other kinds of cohousing; and that this difference is under-studied.

On the other hand, some studies examine senior cohousing without acknowledging the existence of other kinds of cohousing at all, i.e. multi-generational (cf Kang *et al.*, 2012). Pedersen (2015) observes that although senior cohousing is related ‘in the grand perspective’ to the ideas of utopian communities, groups (in Denmark) are not ‘idealistic collectivists’ but focus on more practical aspects that relate to ageing. Indeed, there is a significant literature (albeit within a relatively small field) that approaches the senior cohousing as one of a number of options that might become more attractive as we age (Baars and Thomése, 1994; Chiodelli and Baglione, 2013; Pitzer, 2014; Vestbro, 2010). Spellerberg and Gerhards (2012) for example, in a study specifically of senior cohousing groups in Germany, explains choice in relation to resisting other retirement home options. From the perspective of the participants, it was notable from my own small study of two groups in the UK that several members of the groups had not been aware of multi-generational cohousing at all when they made their decision (Hudson, 2017). This practical perspective is echoed in the growing media interest in senior cohousing in the UK, in particular following the move-in of the first project in the country (cf *The Guardian*, 15th Feb 2015; BBC London, 2017; *The Telegraph*, 31st May 2017).

Certainly, older people’s self-managed, collaborative housing is regarded by its advocates as a response that addresses the challenges of ageing and isolation through proximate community and mutual support in later life (Brenton, 2001; Durrett, 2009; Fromm, 2006; Tummers, 2015a). But what is most fundamental in senior cohousing draws on the fourth point noted in the cohousing definition earlier: *to be fully controlled and managed by its residents*. It is notable that the title of Maria Brenton’s study of senior cohousing in the Netherlands (1998) is prefixed with the phrase ‘*We’re in charge*’; she makes the fundamental point that to meet the definition of senior cohousing, all decisions with regard to management of the community must rest ultimately with its residents, irrespective of tenure. And as will be discussed below in the context of motivations to join senior cohousing groups, advocates often frame the model as a repost to societal ageism and assumptions about the abilities and independence of older people (see for instance Marriot, 2010).

The scope and focus of the senior cohousing literature

There is no universal agreement on the use of the term *senior* cohousing – unsurprising given the tensions around constructions of ‘old age’ previously discussed – indeed some avoid the term or regard it as a pejorative (Glass, 2009; Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013). However, *senior cohousing* remains in use by other key proponents of the model (Durrett, 2009; Brenton, 2013), and for succinctness the term will continue to be used here, while acknowledging that not all groups may either define or regard themselves under such a banner. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, in Berlin and Germany, the term is not in widespread use, nor are all groups that I would identify even aware of the term. However, in the absence of an alternative term I will continue to use ‘senior cohousing’ here to mean cohousing groups that are not ‘multi-generational’, i.e. have no children or families in the group, and whose members have joined with the intention of living together through later life, even if there is no strict lower age limit.

The senior cohousing model – like cohousing more generally – has its roots in the Danish community housing concept pioneered in the 1970s (Forbes, 2002; McCamant and Durrett, 2004). But specifically *senior* cohousing has long been a widespread and successful model in the Netherlands (Baars and Thomése, 1994; Brenton, 1998) as well as Scandinavia, (Kähler, 2010; Labit, 2015, Tummers 2015b), and is growing from a smaller base in the US and Australia (Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013; Rogers, 2014; Jarvis, 2015). As noted in the introduction chapter, the UK has an increasing number of senior cohousing projects at various development stages, with several close to completion (Hudson, 2017; UKCN, 2018). Thus far however it boasts only one completed project where residents have moved in: the Older Women’s Cohousing group, or OWCH, in north London (Brenton, 2017). While Germany has more than 500 established cohousing projects, only a tiny proportion of these are specifically groups formed by older people (*id22*, 2018). However, significant growth in senior groups has been noted (Ache and Fedrowitz, 2012) with the potential to be much bigger: Labit (2015) reports on a survey indicating that 28% of Germans over 55 are ‘strongly interested’. At present however, at least in the UK and Germany, senior cohousing remains a marginal housing form, whose members retain the status of pioneers.

Given the relatively limited literature thus far, it is unsurprising that much of the writing is descriptive, focused on the definition and extent of the model in different countries (cf Forbes, 2002; Vestbro, 2010). Literature that examines the phenomenon in greater depth is thus far spread relatively thinly across a range of themes, which include the extent of senior cohousing in different countries and why it might be more culturally embedded in some places more than others (Sangregorio, 2000; Sandstedt, 2010; Glass, 2012; Labit, 2015). There is a limited literature on the planning, legal and economic challenges of development (Scott-Hunt, 2007, 2009; Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015; Tummers, 2015c), but as previously noted, Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia call for more research to explore the phenomena from economic rather than a communitarian perspectives. The authors note, as does Rogers (2014) that on the self-funded ownership models of senior cohousing in many countries which can be seen as an outcome of the baby boomer generation as consumers creating the economic demand for such options as much as driven by more utopian idealism. Pederson (2015) even notes cases where senior cohousing residents in Sweden admitted to having responded primarily to the quality of the housing rather than its social ideals, with properties in high demand over other retirement housing; one woman described how she had ‘gone along with the community thing’ in order to obtain a place. It should of course be acknowledged – and will be discussed below – that the ability to afford such bespoke housing solutions plays a major role for the baby boomer and equivalent post-war generations.

Where economic capital or social class are mentioned in the various studies and surveys, the overall picture is of a senior cohousing as something pursued predominantly by the middle classes, likely reflecting the predominant model of owner-occupation (cf Andresen and Runge, 2002; Choi, 2004; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Glass, 2009; Glass, 2012; Kang *et al.*, 2012; Glass, 2013; Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013; Labit, 2015; Pedersen, 2015; Sandstedt and Westin, 2015; Hudson, 2017). There is less data available where cohousing created by groups of tenants has been widely established, for instance in the Netherlands, where renting is a secure, long-term form of tenure (Brenton, 1998; Baars and Thomése, 1994). Although barriers to entry around wealth and class are sometimes acknowledged (Baars and Thomése, 1994, Scanlon and Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2015), there is little exploration of these in depth.

Social and cultural attitudes are also inseparable from the economics of the model, and vary between countries: Jarvis (2012) argues that some parts of the ‘movement’, especially in north America, are keen to distance cohousing from communes in an economic sense, with no income pooling. The model is implicitly placed in a neoliberal setting, with one member of a US-based group describing cohousing as a *‘beautiful blend of community and capitalism’*. There are other perspectives especially from European examples however, most notably that for older women particularly, cohousing proffers the chance of mutual support where financial resources are lacking. As Anne Labit (2015) notes:

Today, more frequently childless than their mothers, outnumbering men, often on their own (divorced, widowed, single), their pensions on average 40% lower than those of men, women see mutual assistance within a co-housing community as one way of attaining better conditions for ageing well.

This is certainly the case for the Babayaga project in Paris (Vermeersch and Cambon, 2009), where the all-female group had often spent lives typically caring for others, while also on very low incomes. Brenton too (1999) has noted how various co-operative living arrangements among older women, while not meeting the full definition of ‘cohousing’ – transitory mobile home communities in the US for instance – nonetheless provide mutually supportive communities for socially marginalised groups. While the literature remains largely qualitative, the limited demographic data reported suggests that senior cohousing as a whole remains numerically a largely female-dominated project (Andresen and Runge, 2002; Choi, 2004; Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Choi and Paulsson, 2011; Glass, 2012; Kang *et al.*, 2012; Glass, 2013; Labit, 2015; Pedersen, 2015; Sandstedt and Westin, 2015; Hudson, 2017).

Senior cohousing and the potential of ‘retrofit’

Virtually all of the literature – for all forms of cohousing including senior models – makes an assumption that the housing is *designed*, i.e. purpose-built as cohousing, and usually emphasises the importance of the group members in the design process (cf Fromm, 1991). In fact the assumption is so widely made that various authors situate cohousing and senior

cohousing as a part of the self-build housing movement (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016) or as a key for more sociably-orientated urban planning (Droste, 2015; Tummers, 2015c). One approach that is much less discussed – either for cohousing or for senior cohousing – *retrofit*. The term is used broadly, to describe a range of possibilities from the adaptation of an existing building or buildings for a new community, to the combining of space such as gardens into shared use (Strobel, 2006; Sanguinetti, 2013, 2015). Forrest (2013) describes a small housing co-operative that occupies two terraced streets in south London that has a highly stable membership that has aged together over decades, and is now seeking to rejuvenate the scheme by transforming it – in effect – into senior cohousing with the use of a vacant flat as their shared space and including frequent meals together.

While there is as yet very little written on the topic – unsurprising since it represents a very small phenomenon within a relatively small phenomenon – it is regarded as having significant potential: Williams (2008) noted that in the US, the ‘organic’ retrofit of an existing community adapting their neighbourhood to form cohousing had proved a more economically accessible, equitable approach than new-build projects. Hill (2017) reports the UK Cohousing Network as being supportive of the idea. I include the subject here to acknowledge that, although not the central framing of this thesis, the location of the primary group involved in my fieldwork offered the chance to reflect on the challenges or opportunities around retrofit for senior cohousing. As will be described in the next chapter, the group central to my study moved into vacant rental apartments in a larger housing estate, renting an additional apartment as the common space.

What motivates people to join senior cohousing?

While there is a lack of definitive quantitative data on senior cohousing projects and their membership, there is a small but significant literature that examines the motivations of people to create or to join senior cohousing projects, and also to some extent biographical data about membership and how this relates to motivations. Thus it is possible to gain a broad impression of what attracts individuals to the idea of senior cohousing from the various qualitative or mixed method studies.

A first key theme that could be drawn from the literature might be regarded as a 'practical response' to different aspects of ageing. While the desire to be in a group is often presented in the literature to be the wish to avoid other retirement home options, it is little explored in studies: Spellerberg and Gerhards (2012) is an exception in a study specifically of senior cohousing groups in Germany, but the thinking of residents around actual care and how senior cohousing might work in comparison to other choices is not further explored. Much more prominent in the attraction to the senior cohousing concept was linked to social isolation; that it presented a positive, independent alternative to increasing isolation from friends and social networks post-retirement. Jolanki and Vilkkö (2015) note how for many members of a Finnish group, geography played a significant role in this respect, quoting one resident as describing how:

[...] if I had a motive to move here, I mean, come here, then definitely this sense of community was an important thing for me. And the fact that, planning my retirement, I thought about how I would have so many fewer everyday contacts. I mean, I have friends around the town, but the more they and myself get aches and minor illnesses with age, the fewer contacts there are. And my relatives live far away. There is not one relative of mine [in the city]. So the significance of the community was really important to me.

Such thinking about potential social isolation is in turn closely related to the desire to remain independent, to stand the best chance of living an autonomous later life among mutually supportive peers, rather than the utopian ideals of a particular kind of community. Often this is underlined by the increasing likelihood among older people that relatives – usually children – are living further away, or that an increasing number of us have not had children at all. My own interview-based study of two groups in the process of forming in the UK (Hudson, 2017) also reflected these drivers, with geographical dislocation as a major motivation, with social networks that had previously existed through jobs and careers quickly dissipating, and family and friends increasingly scattered across the country, and even internationally. An unusually high proportion of the members also had no children, and for those people thinking about who might support them in old age in that role was probably the strongest impetus.

Several authors note how for many people in industrialised societies, family is no longer of overriding social importance, with family members often far away or unprepared to offer support (Baars and Thomése, 1994; Glass, 2009; Brenton, 2011, 2013; Kang *et al.*, 2012). Further, older people themselves may not wish to impose on their own children, given their own experiences of having to support their parents in later life (Kang *et al.*, 2012) as one aspirant group member described in my own UK-based study:

My parents [were] the sort of people referred to as 'retiring badly'. After me and my sister had already left home, they bought a five-bedroom detached house quite far from either of us, then pointedly refused to move out of it, even when it became completely unsuitable.

The comment above also hints at a second theme in considering motivations: that senior cohousing, while being a practical response to the need to plan for later life, at the same time reflects a generational shift in attitudes and outlook that is arguably also aligned with ideas of the third age. Senior cohousing has been perceived as being linked to the demands of these generational shifts, specifically the baby boomer generation (Bouma and Voorbij, 2009; Rogers, 2014), with Labit (2015) regarding senior cohousing as a perfect fit for the boomers because they '*reject passivity and solitude, all too often associated with the old age experience of their parents' generation, and desire social ties and participation*'. Much of the grey literature reflects this more strongly, i.e. books and publications aimed at attracting new supporters and scaling up the model to become mainstream. In the United States, the journal *Community* regularly publishes opinion pieces by scholars or practitioners involved in the movement (cf Abraham & de La Grange, 2006; Critchlow, 2015; Critchlow & Moore, 2015), where one notable theme is a rejection by members of groups of their parents' choices in later life (as noted in the quote above), and a fuller embracing of a third age. Marriott (2010) for instance, presents the attitudes of the group of which she is a member in a unapologetically ambitious manner in this context:

We accept the inevitability of aging, and we want to be in control of our aging process. Ours will not be our parents aging. It will be different – vibrant, socially revolutionary, and fun.

Charles Durrett – recognised as the key writer and advocate of the model, and whose *Senior Cohousing Handbook* (Durrett, 2009) is taken to be the ‘bible’ for practitioners in many countries – acknowledges the model as a direct response to the demands of the baby boomers, placing their approach firmly in a third age paradigm. In the Handbook, he positions senior cohousing as a reflection of:

...the tremendous impact from the largest and most influential demographic in history: the baby boomers, who are aging together with the same values, spunk, and determination that led them to change our society since their youth.

Durrett, 2009: 18

Thus a strong theme in the literature remains the demand for senior cohousing as a response to a generational shift toward greater expectations of later life: not just a wish to remain in control in later for practical reasons, but a fundamental expectation that passive acceptance of a lesser quality of life in retirement is to be avoided. As previously noted, Glass (2009) and Wagner *et al.* (2010) describe individuals becoming more socially involved in their new cohousing communities on their own terms, but unhindered by the patronising ‘organised leisure’ of many retirement communities managed by others (Kang *et al.*, 2012). Brenton (1998, 2013) frames senior cohousing as fundamentally a rejection of paternalistic and managed forms of housing for older people, as a way of remaining in control of one’s life in a way that any other age group might reasonably expect to be.

It might be asked, if one aspect of the attraction to senior cohousing is a rejection of stereotypes of ageing and of being ‘old people’, why individuals might choose to live with a group of other older people at all? The question is worth posing because it raises questions of age and identity, namely what do members identify with in such groups that they feel is different and preferable to a group of all generations. It is notable that in an international survey of age-integrated cohousing, Forbes (2002) found that older members had made a conscious choice *not* to live in age-segregated housing, and expressed a strong aversion to doing so, often citing their own negative stereotypes of groups of ‘older people’ as the primary reason. In my own study (Hudson, 2017), there were mixed views among residents: some had

been keen to join multi-generational groups but there were none available in the areas that they were looking. But a majority seemed to view themselves, if not as 'old', then certainly as part of a cohort that had its own separate group identity from younger generations. One member described how:

As an older person, I don't feel I need to stay around. You know, [my daughter] is so passionate about Brockley, there's nowhere better in the world as far as she's concerned, [daughter and boyfriend], they're of that generation, they have a baby, and there's all these people having babies. But really, I want to be somewhere which permits me to be a senior person.

Charles Durrett draws on case studies of senior groups in the US to conclude that most older people are far from antagonistic toward younger generations, but that often having raised families themselves, they've '*been there, done that*', and are now seeking peace and quiet in a place that retains strong connections to the outside world, but offers a respite from it (Durrett, 2009: 32). Andrea Jones finds ambivalence among older members of inter-generational cohousing groups in the UK, but many of her participants felt marginalised by younger members, particularly those with young families, and that the needs and priorities of those younger members were always put first. Further, some felt strongly that the major questions around decline and dependency were ones that could not be addressed in such groups, and had considered moving elsewhere, despite having lived in the group for a large part of their lives (Jones, 2017: 169).

Perhaps surprisingly, the question of what exactly defines a group as 'older' is rarely raised – a seemingly trivial issue but one that touches on the under-explored theme of how members regard themselves in the context of motivations; there is a significant difference, for instance, between someone in their 50s considering joining a group that is also in their 50s, and that same person's perception of a group in their 70s or 80s. Stevens (2016) notes that groups usually have no fixed lower (or upper) limit to entry, given the nature of the senior cohousing groups as stemming from an original core that is unlikely to have felt such limits necessary. In the author's description, members of groups that define themselves as *older* or *senior* might be as young as 50, not necessarily retired, but whose children are no longer resident (or are childless). Sandstedt and Westin (2015) are an exception in discussing how, in their Swedish

study of cohousing projects ‘for the second half of life’, they use this term to encompass groups aged ‘40+’, i.e. middle aged and working, through to those in retirement. Their perception was that what was of key importance in defining the groups as ‘second half of life’ was to live without young families and children, rather than an arbitrary lower age limit such as state retirement age. Notably, they avoid the term *senior cohousing* altogether.

In considering the motivations for joining groups set out above there seems to be a potential tension however: on one hand a rejection of ‘oldness’ through a rejection of the previous generation’s housing decisions, on the other a wish to identify with a group of other people of similar age. Perhaps this is less a contradiction, and for many group members represents an acceptance of being at a certain life stage and having a shared culture with those of a similar age, while also recognising that sharing lives with younger families is impractical. The extent to which such a shared identity is considered in the lived experience of groups is explored later below.

Age, identity, and the social dynamics within senior cohousing groups

While the literature that considers motivations and to some extent issues of age and identity has been described above, there has been much less written about how the same themes relate to the lived experience of such communities as its members grow older together, especially within a framing of socio-gerontology and the ideas of a third and fourth age. A practical problem for many empirical studies, particularly in the UK, is the dearth of fully-established groups that are specifically older. Thus literature that does explore the lived experience of ageing in cohousing groups often draws on inter-generational groups, e.g. the study by Jones (2016), who carried out in-depth qualitative interviews with older members of multiple groups across the UK.

Where the social dynamics and life within explicitly senior cohousing is addressed, there is often a strong emphasis on the necessity for communities to actively build community through a formalised process of workshops and group exercises (Forbes, 2002; Durrett, 2009; Glass, 2009; Brenton, 2011). These activities are often framed from a prescriptive point of view, albeit usually through reference to practical experience. Kang *et al.* (2012) describe the importance

of community and social capital, and several studies stress the benefits of senior cohousing in terms of the quality of life and wellbeing that stems from this (Andresen and Runge, 2002; Choi, 2004; Choi and Paulsson, 2011). Forbes (2002: 6) finds that for cohousing schemes, ‘... *connectedness and social participation contribute to a happier and healthier old age*’. What is lacking in most accounts however is a critical exploration of underlying assumptions about the nature of ageing; a stronger recognition that such needs are not specifically a function of ‘being older’ but a result of more complex processes in later life, which we know from the other literature discussed is unlikely to be easy to negotiate.

There are some exceptions, that explore what senior cohousing groups mean to their members in terms of social structure and the potential for reciprocity. Jolanki and Vilkkö (2015) present one of these, and describe a qualitative study of a Finnish project established by older people in 2006. The authors seek to understand how a ‘sense of community’ is understood by the members as distinct from inter-generational groups, and find generally very positive responses: that the residents enjoyed the experience of being among peers from whom they enjoyed emotional support, as well as a sense of security derived from a sense of belonging. Most interesting is that the group feel that this sense of belonging would not be possible elsewhere (i.e. in a community organised by others) because the care for each other is *reciprocated*. To quote two short extracts from the study’s participants, when asked to describe what the community meant to them:

The possibility to give and receive, not just through reciprocity between people, but by giving to the community, for instance, by working while you still can – I will get help for myself later, when I need it.

... the longer we have lived here, the better it’s been, of course, or, I mean, we know each other. And that way you are able to pay attention to the other person and offer them help when they need it. So of course there are situations, I’ve had some myself over the years, although it’s not really necessary to talk out loud about them. But I’ve felt that someone has needed me as well. Even though I don’t always think about it.

These sentiments echo Helen Jarvis’s emphasis on reciprocity as part of the importance of ‘social architecture’ that underpins all successful cohousing communities (Jarvis, 2015). Jolanki

and Vilkkö's small study (2015) does suggest that within older groups that these aspects of reciprocity are made more possible in part at least by members being among a group of their peers, who feel comfortable together and accepting of each other. Unfortunately the paper is only a short one, and while touching on these issues – as well as hinting at disappointment and conflict among members connected to the social rules that define the community's life together – it leaves these themes hanging tantalisingly.

A study by Standstedt and Westin (2015) is also an exception in focussing on older groups, which again is relatively short but is most notable for speculating on ways of thinking about senior cohousing as an apparently new form of sociality. The study is of four cohousing groups in Sweden – all restricted to those over 40 – each of which has around 50 members. The authors found the character of individual social bonds and friendships to be hugely diverse: there are close friendships that formed within the groups, but serious antagonisms, with several sub-groups who have little contact. Yet the projects function well overall, with several of those included in the study stressing that the social structure is not based on friendships or family bonds, with one noting how residents are '*... very careful about not referring to ourselves as family*'.

The authors draw on Ferdinand Tönnies' (late 19th century) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as the two dominant types of social group; the former represents the 'warm' enclosed community of the rural village, whereas the latter is the '*vast, "cold" mass society with its isolated and atomized individuals*'. They conclude that cohousing is not a *Gemeinschaft* – no-one in their own study was seeking family-like intimacy – but that neither is it *Gesellschaft* (although it exists within it). Instead, Sandtsedt and Westin frame cohousing – specifically cohousing for later life – as an attempt to fuse the advantages of both of these, while being a distinct new form that is neither. In doing so they revive Tönnies' idea of the '*Bund*' – an older but apt concept that:

... can be defined as an elective form of sociation, in which the main characteristics are that it is small scale, spatially proximate and maintained through the affectual solidarity its members have for one another.

Hetherington, 1998: 8

While this seems a useful framing of how we might think about the social structure within senior cohousing and how members themselves negotiate their lives within the group, it represents the limits of such exploration. In both Jolanki and Vilkkö's, and Sandtsedt and Westin's studies, issues of future planning, the renewal of the group through recruiting younger members or disability are all absent. The boundaries of care and matters of a 'fourth age' generally are also absent, perhaps in part because their groups have not faced many of these. The final part of this chapter explores the extent to which the existing literature does address these themes.

Issues of decline and the 'fourth age' in the senior cohousing literature

Significant attention is given in the literature to issues of potential physical decline, and to what extent such mutually supportive communities might offer an alternative to care services elsewhere. Labit (2015) in a survey of cohousing in Europe, suggests that older members do not always regard cohousing as a suitable place to deal with physical or mental decline, but others (Wagner *et al.*, 2010; Peace *et al.*, 2011) found that although many residents admit they may eventually have to move to a care home, they will avoid intermediate options such as 'assisted living' or 'extra-care'. Through an extensive study of senior cohousing in the Netherlands, Baars and Thomése (1994) argue that 'communal living ensures the possibility of mutual care while possibly preventing dependence on professional care or care provided by adult children'.

Others argue (cf Brenton, 2013; Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013) that senior cohousing communities are not a direct substitute for care, but through social interaction avoid the *need* for the kind of medicalised care that is actually often a reflection of social rather than medical deficiencies. Further, Baars and Thomése note that seeing senior cohousing as a substitute for organised care misses the point, arguing that to view these communities as inadequate because they cannot cope with the 'real difficulties of old age' such as dementia, is an example of the dominant care perspective. The real point, they claim, is to avoid being treated as objects of care for as long as possible, and if and when such care is needed, to avoid it becoming an identity:

[...] the heterogeneous nature of an expanded boomer generation will mean a 'care' approach will be insufficient; [cohousing] groups will answer a need for 'energetic elderly people' who will resist the perspective of care, as one possibility.

Baars and Thomése, 1994

The deeper potential tensions within groups around these issues are however little explored. Glass (2009) records how a questionnaire for potential residents in one North American development encouraged thoughtfulness about issues of caring and support as members aged,

and sought responses to the statement 'I am willing to face the mysteries of aging and death'. But this appears exceptional, or at least more typical of North American groups where issues of well-being and spirituality play a greater role than in northern Europe (Glass, 2009, 2012, 2013; Glass and Vander Plaats, 2013). Andresen and Runge (2002) ask, by contrast, whether residents might 'change their attitudes towards fellowship and common occupations when they get older and their physical abilities change.' They find themselves unable to answer this from the data they have, and suggest that that longitudinal studies would be one way of pursuing the question. In fact, in the academic literature generally there remains a lack of empirical research either longitudinal or ethnographic that explores the issues of health, decline and mutual support in senior cohousing groups, and broadly it is taken for granted that the aims of the 'movement' in these terms can be met. Despite being grey literature, Charles Durrett's *Senior Cohousing Handbook* (Durrett, 2009) is worth drawing on here as it does represent the single most in-depth piece of writing on the subject of how groups might think about, plan for, and enact issues of mutual care and support as members experience physical or mental decline or chronic health issues. The text draws on Durrett's many years of interviews and studies primarily with groups in Denmark, but also the United States. More importantly, as the senior cohousing movement's 'bible' it has been influential in the formation of many senior cohousing groups, and thus represents a familiar set of ideas for many members, whether directly or through groups' own individual set of tailored aims.

Much of Durrett's book's text reflects the themes of the wider literature in focussing on the project inception, design and procurement processes, and (as previously noted) sometimes takes an at-times uncritical stance on its baby boomer perspective. In fairness the author makes no claims that it is a critical work addressing issues of unequal access to cohousing through issues of wealth or social class, for instance. However, a core chapter – which Durrett emphasizes as the most important of the book – gives primacy to the need for senior cohousing groups to focus at an early stage on planning around key aspects of the ageing process (2009:117-124). A number of themes are examined in depth, presented as a series of workshops with actual groups. Despite the reservations noted above, I have selected and summarised some of these here, as they come closest of all the literature referenced in this chapter to exploring the challenges of groups facing the ageing process together. These were

themes that were useful reference points in my own fieldwork, even when enquiries along these lines began to lead in other directions.

Ageing in community

Members were asked to think about their ‘future ageing scenario’ in detail, in terms of friendships, family social networks and so on, and how this fitted with the life they planned together. Interestingly, such discussions sometimes resulted in some deciding that senior cohousing was not for them.

One potential pitfall – reflecting in effect a fear of the fourth age – is that groups apparently focus too much at an early stage on design for disability, adaptation and so on. Durrett notes that while such aspects are important, discussions arrive at this too quickly, often with worst case scenarios that never come to pass (albeit he notes this in the context that other factors, primarily an adequate group size and good range of ages, are in place).

Group process, conflict	Although by no means exclusive to older groups, the importance of accepting that conflict is inevitable is emphasized, and that as well as agreeing how decisions are to be made by the group, different routes to conflict resolution should also be considered.
The practical realities of getting older	<i>‘How does one “age gracefully”, taking care of aches and pains and limitations – physical, financial, mental, and social – while maintaining quality of life?’</i> groups are encouraged to discuss the physical, mental and psychological challenges of growing older, recognising that death is inevitable, but planning realistically for how they might best support a better last part of life and its attendant social needs.
Mutual care and outside care	This touches first on planning for a range of ages in the group, and for successful succession, i.e. how to ensure the group is not a single cohort that ages together toward a point where it is increasingly difficult to care for each other, and also to attract new, younger members to the group. But the focus is on the importance of establishing the limits of care to be provided by the group – especially around dementia.

Table 1: Ageing process themes in senior cohousing, summarised from Durrett, 2009:117-124.

What is most striking is that no simple or single answers are given in response to many of the themes, but there are interesting discussions around different approaches. Some of these will be returned to as touchpoints in my conclusion chapter.

2.5 Summary, and the case for this study

Rather than beginning with the senior cohousing literature itself, this chapter has first focussed on broader contexts and ideas primarily from the field of socio-gerontology, in particular the concepts of the third and fourth age as a way of better understanding the ageing process from the perspective of older people themselves. While acknowledging that senior cohousing might form a useful part of a social policy response to the challenges of an ageing population in the UK and its attendant risks of physical and social isolation, I have used these ideas as a central framing in exploring the motivations and lived experience of senior cohousing groups. I argue that such intentional communities created by and for older people can be considered as sites in which the potential tensions between the enactment of a new identity of ‘successful’ later life and the vicissitudes of old age might play out.

The chapter has additionally acknowledged other key lenses, namely those of the role of forms of social capital and networks, alongside concepts of reciprocity and neighbouring support in later life, whose relevance here has been led by the findings that arose from the grounded approach taken. While not the central framing, these ideas are also drawn on discussions of those findings.

Given the relatively small literature on senior cohousing – reflecting perhaps the model as a numerically insignificant part of the housing picture for older people – it is unsurprising that studies have been spread relatively thinly across a range of themes and approaches. Many tend to be largely descriptive, or focus for instance on specific issues such as the practical or economic challenges of establishing a group and developing a project. Labit in her own paper (2015) notes significant gaps in the senior cohousing literature, highlighting how little attention thus far has been given to qualitative, empirical studies of how such communities actually

function socially once established. She raises a number of largely unexplored questions and themes, echoing those already noted by Andresen and Runge (2002), and which include why cohousing communities of only older people might represent something substantively different from so-called multi-generational groups, how mutual reciprocity might function in the long term, or the practical problems of succession when a group ages as a cohort. Further, Jarvis (2015) notes that even for the literature on cohousing as a whole, a *'gap remains in our understanding of the social phenomena of mutuality and collaboration in practice'*.

While there is work that examines the motivations of older adults for joining such groups, and to some extent the social dynamics within them. There is some recent literature that has begun to focus on the meaning of such groups to its members in terms of the mutual support and reciprocity that has been claimed as its primary attribute, e.g. Jolanki and Vilkkö (2015), Labit (2015), and Sandstedt and Westin (2015). But there remains a particular lack of research on the social and sociological aspects of the model, in particular around the lived experience in the longer term, and the importance of age and identity in such groups.

Chapter 3: Research approach

3.1 Introduction

It was established in the introduction chapter that my primary academic interest in senior cohousing is about the lived experience: how the aims that underpin the idea are negotiated in reality. And for this reason it was important to identify possible groups that were well-established, and had experienced life together over years. Several qualitative studies of senior cohousing have been noted in the previous chapter, but which in the main comprise broader surveys of multiple groups, usually interview-based from a sample of members; I was keen to focus as deeply as possible on a very few groups, to better understand how such groups function socially in the context of ageing, and to get a sense of the role the group plays in its members' lives. While I had a set of broad themes or questions, I was keen to remain open to exploring what the key challenges or advantages of a group's life together were.

This chapter therefore begins by making the case for the research methods I chose, before moving on to describe the groups that I considered in Berlin for my fieldwork, in particular the group on which I primarily decided to focus. A detailed description is included in this chapter because the particular nature of each of those (few) groups had a material impact on the largely practical decisions I made in my research approach; the description also helps to set the scene for the empirical chapters. Finally, the chapter moves on to a more detailed description of my research methods and ethical approach, as they unfolded through the actual experience of the research.

3.2 Methods

This section sets out the reasoning for my chosen research methods, reflecting my desire to explore the lived social experience of established senior housing groups, to achieve what Lofland (1971: 8) describes as ‘intimate familiarity’. Essentially I took a broadly ethnographic approach – specifically participant observation – and supplemented this with in-depth, one-on-one interviews with each of the group members. As previously noted, while I did start with an interest in particular questions and broad themes around, my arguments also came from analysing emergent themes as the fieldwork progressed, to some extent following an open, grounded theory approach (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). Thus I was attentive to themes that emerged as the fieldwork progressed, through the mix of interview and observational data of everyday behaviour and the social structures that it reflects.

The case for ethnography

Degen (2015) highlights the practical advantages of ethnography – or ‘hanging around’ over an extended period – as opposed to visiting only for interviews or for a short period: firstly that it is possible to observe, and sometimes to be party to, events and their consequences. But she also notes the even more practical aspect of being able to capture more, that participants involved in research do not ‘neatly provide data’ in accordance with the researcher’s timetable. Such practical arguments move me toward planning a fieldwork period over as long a period as possible (and which in the end became around seven months), but an ethnographic approach also for me came out of other considerations. It was established in the previous chapter that ‘old age’ – despite the redefining of later life roles by some members of the boomer generation – remains a stigmatised label, socially constructed by an ageist society and applied to older people (who have themselves internalised a lifetime of ageist attitudes). Thus, any research around issues of later life and ageing probes into highly sensitive areas: aspects of identity and self-image that people may be unwilling to discuss openly or honestly, concealing ‘truths’ about their own ageing as something that still remains taboo. Grenier (2007) argues that with an issue as sensitive as ageing, especially when research is conducted in individual’s homes and ‘home territories’ – as most of my fieldwork was – significant time is

required for a careful approach to overcome the natural suspicion that is the likely response to an 'invasive' researcher.

Further, Biggs (2005) reminds us that in the context of such social stigma around age, those in later life might present an identity to the researcher that may 'only partially reflect the experience of aging or the perspective of the older adult'. Others explore the specific reasons behind this; both Grenier (2007), and Dobbs *et al.*, (2008) note that evidence of physical or cognitive decline might be withheld or denied, presenting a certain picture to maintain self-respect. Mannheim (1999) suspects that someone older might wish to avoid relating certain negative aspects of ageing to spare the feelings of a younger researcher; on the other hand, a respondent might answer questions in a way that they think a researcher expects, making sometimes inaccurate or unhelpful suggestions about the research in accordance with their preconceptions (Tarrant, 2013), or in response to perceived societal expectations of older people (Gubrium and Wallace, 1991). I was particularly sensitive to the problem that, given that a designation of 'old' is often rejected by older people themselves in later life, a researcher might elicit no meaningful response at all to questions about age; Matthews notes from her own early research experience that asking direct questions about 'being old' was often met 'either with platitudes or incomprehension' (1979: 25). Jumping ahead for a moment to reflect on my own research experience, I admit that although I felt I would be attentive to such issues, in practice I carried some of my own age-related prejudices into the research, with an initial feeling as the research began that I was with a group of people who I perceived above all else as 'older'. The process by which this impression faded into simply knowing a group of different individuals whose identities were not much 'made' by being a certain chronological age sometimes became a part of the data collection itself, and is reflected upon at various stages in the empirical chapters.

I argue that ethnography as an approach in my research serves two functions: that there is sufficient time and social proximity to build trust and get closer to the subjects, and to as great an extent as possible move beyond performances of age that are based on assumptions made both by the respondent and also by the researcher, in a way that is not possible in 'stand-alone' interviews. A further argument – specifically for participant observation – is that the method presents an insight into what people actually do rather than what they say they do, either

because they wish to actively conceal some aspect of their lives, or more likely because we all perceive our own lives differently than an observer might (Fine, 2015). Two apparently opposing perspectives might be compared, for instance a dissonance between the aspirations of the group and its actuality. In a previous study of my own (Hudson, 2017) I note how, in the case of two UK groups who had cohered socially for several years but were yet to complete their respective housing projects, very high expectations of their future social lives as ‘pioneers’ of senior cohousing seemed to negate discussion of how the negative aspects of later life might be overcome. Thus I was aware that residents of established groups might be reluctant to admit to any aspect of disappointment to an outsider.

It should be noted at this point that an exact definition of ethnography is contested: Karen O’Reilly, for instance, (2012) holds that ethnography is a broad social science approach that has participant observation as its core method, while Fine (2015) claims that for many, the terms ethnography and participant observation are synonymous. Notwithstanding this lack of clarity over terms, O’Reilly (2012: 2) goes on to note that a number of elements are broadly agreed as being essential to an ethnographic approach – and which are used as the definition here – namely that ethnography: usually comprises small scale research that focuses on a particular group; is undertaken over a significant period of time in everyday settings; uses multiple methods; involves participation; and evolves in its research design as it proceeds.

Learning from earlier ethnographies of older groups

There is a body of literature that draws directly on ethnographic research with communities of older people, specifically participant observation, which reflects the extension of the ethnographic approach into the field of gerontology from the late 1960s onwards; despite some of these studies being of considerable age, I found them both useful and inspiring – and examples of deep ethnography that is increasingly impossible in the time and cost constraints of academic research in more recent times. Such work chimed with a ‘critical turn’ in the field of gerontology (Oldman, 2003) that had previously been dominated by more pathologised and ‘outsider’ approaches to ageing, and each can be seen as a study of how a stigmatized group – older people – negotiated the ageing process as a group, creating a sense of community in the face of wider societal indifference. Key examples of this ‘new’ ethnographic approach (and

which have also been heavily referred to in the previous chapter) include Arlie Hochschild's *The Unexpected Community* (1973), Jaber Gubrium's *Living and Dying at Murray Manor* (1975), Jennie Keith's *Old People, New Lives* (1982), Sarah Matthews' *The Social Life of Old Women* (1979) and Maria Vesperi's *City of Green Benches* (1985). While each of these works has its own particular focus, there are a number of key aims and themes in common, which are relevant here. Writing about the continued relevance of studies by Keith and also Vesperi, Degnen notes how ethnography – with its basis in anthropology – can be used to study ageing by seeking to understand the perspective and experiences of older people themselves, as '*a powerful tool for revealing and challenging processes of otherization and alterity*' (Degnen, 2015: 108).

Each of the researchers succeeded in 'getting close' to their chosen social group to an extent that individuals felt more willing to speak openly about issues normally withheld due in large part to the stigma around ageing. Arlie Hochschild (1973), for instance, in her ethnographic study with a community of older women living together in San Francisco in the late 1960s, relates how some of her most fundamental assumptions about older people were challenged as she got to know them and observe their everyday lives together. A key aspect of her approach was that rather than presenting herself to the group purely as a researcher, she lived close by over a period of two years, taking part in their various shared activities, becoming familiar with how they were with each other, and (to some extent) becoming a confidante. She came to realise that how they spoke and behaved with each other was quite different from the way that they behaved with 'outsiders', by whom they were treated very differently, regarded as a stigmatised, homogeneous group. Both Hochschild and Matthews (1979) *explicitly* argue in the introductions to their respective studies that such a move from 'outsider' to 'insider' allowed them to get past their own prejudiced stereotypes, but also for the groups to drop their guard about certain issues. In turn, they note, this was only possible through a long-term participant observation as part of an ethnographic approach.

Matthews also describes how, in her own research, combining participant observation and intensive interviewing allowed her to 'get close' to her subjects (older widows) and reach beyond the stigma of age. But she makes a specific point regarding participant observation in relation to ageing: that age, being socially negotiated rather than a compartmentalised aspect

of private identity, is 'made' continually, everywhere, and is not confined to what is said in an interview, noting that: '*... being a particular age, in this case "old", like being a particular gender or ethnicity, colors every aspect of people's lives*' (Matthews, 1979: 24). Above all, the studies by Matthews, Keith and Hochschild all acknowledge age as a *process*, thus exploring not just personal histories and backgrounds, but how events occur in 'real time', and are then able to explore the possible meanings behind these. It is notable how chance or gradual observations are a strong source of data in many such accounts, which would be impossible through methods that did not involve the 'personal witnessing' of participant observation. In a later study by Laura Hurd at a seniors' social centre in central Canada, for instance, she describes how, in the context of older people negotiating and hiding health problems in late life:

... not all of the women unreservedly share their health problems and many seem reluctant to discuss them with their peers. Some women described their health problems to me in hushed voices or when other people were not around. One woman strongly forbade me to tell her friends that she was experiencing an angina attack after I discovered her taking nitro-glycerine in the women's washroom.

Hurd (1999: 108)

Roth *et al.* (2012) write of how, over time, tensions within a particular retirement community between younger and older residents (with the former represented by the boomer generation) only emerged gradually, with residents initially unwilling to relate an incident that had sparked the issue. Degnen (2007), describes witnessing a telling event that became key to her subsequent understanding of ageist attitudes *by* older people against others, only apparent because she had been present over a period of several months with the group.

Such methods seem especially apposite given the degree to which the core aim of the senior cohousing model (in fact of all cohousing) is presented as the building of mutual friendship and support, primarily through social interaction in a shared space (Fromm, 1991; Glass, 2009; Durrett, 2009). While Ahrentzen (1996) describes the critical importance of 'co-presence' and 'affiliation' in making collaborative housing projects work – how shared space is used to share knowledge and build social relationships – Jarvis (2015: 98) observes how, in a study of several

cohousing groups, the whole social existence of a group is predicated on the centrality of shared activities:

... mundane tasks (cooking, gardening, making and mending) are transformed by the sociality of work as a ritual that is performed and endowed with a sense of occasion: swapping stories while working together in teams at the weekends; basking in the glow of achievement at producing a meal for the whole group.

While in practice an ethnographic approach was less easy and at times more limited than I had hoped (and will be discussed later), it remained a central intent and method throughout my fieldwork, participating and observing with the members of more than one group, in the continual act of 'making' cohousing through social interaction.

The extent of my own ethnography

My own approach was broadly ethnographic, and included participant observation but also two rounds of in-depth interviews with the core group, as well as additional interviews with two other groups and with occasional additional interviews from other groups or with those involved in the wider cohousing network in Berlin. A full summary of interviews and other data collection is given in [Appendix A](#). As will be explained below, my focus over the seven months of the fieldwork was largely on one group; my work with that group included a core of more structured one-to-one interviews (24 in total, with each of the members interviewed twice, except for one who declined), but also numerous less formal engagement and social activity with the group. These included less formal meetings such as dropping by for coffee with a member of the group, joining some of the group at weekly lunches organised at the local neighbourhood centre, going on LAiC's monthly walking day trips (usually outside the city) as well as the occasional evening event organised by the group or (by specific invitation) to the group's weekly 'Plenum' management meeting. In addition there were of course the serendipitous meetings around the estate inevitable for a group of people living close by and a visitor as frequent as I became.

Occasionally, mainly in less formal one-to-one meetings, I was able to audio record the conversation where it felt appropriate to ask, but for a majority of the time I took hand-written notes (described in more detail later). The greatest advantage of this approach was the opportunity for regular informal conversation with members about the group, gradually gaining a better understanding of LAiC's social dynamics through first hand observation and second-hand related stories, as my thoughts and ideas developed. Most directly, it was possible for me to develop these thoughts, which I then used in assembling a set of much more focussed questions for the final round of formal interviews done toward the end of the fieldwork period. Sometimes my own involvement and connections elsewhere became more directly a part of the research process, the most notable occasions being my attempt to involve the group in a Berlin-based cohousing conference with which I was already involved, and my organising of a lunch event myself at the local neighbourhood centre; both of these are discussed in later empirical chapters.

3.3 Senior cohousing groups in Berlin

As was described in Chapter 2, the extent of senior cohousing in the UK remains at an emergent or ‘pioneer’ stage, and only very recently has a first group completed its development process and moved in together (UK Cohousing Network, 2018). For research that aims to explore the lived experience of senior cohousing groups, it is clearly important to consider groups that are well established, and the city of Berlin presented an opportunity in this respect. On one hand, it could be argued that senior cohousing is much better established in the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, where to varying extents it could be considered a mainstream option for housing in later life, or at least one familiar to much of the population (Labit, 2015). However, Bouma and Voorbij (2009) make a case that decades of state intervention and support in these countries – especially the Netherlands – underpins the success of the model (albeit state support has been withdrawn in recent years), alongside a strong culture of communitarian living in those countries. By contrast, Germany has a cohousing movement that is more recently established than in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, and lacks the state support at a national level seen in those countries (Mensch and Novy-Huy, 2008; Ache and Fedrowitz, 2012). Further, the extent of specifically senior cohousing in Germany is, from literature but also my own searches (Ache and Fedrowitz, 2012; Fedrowitz and Matzke, 2013; Kehl and Then, 2013; Kramer and Pfaffenbach, 2015; Labit and Dubost, 2016; Wohnprojekte-Portal.de, 2017) not significantly widespread, especially considering the much greater numbers of cohousing projects or comparable communities than the UK. I would argue therefore that cohousing for older people in Germany and Berlin remains usefully comparable to the UK in the sense of a ‘pioneer’ activity (Junge, 2015), but crucially is able to provide actual established examples.

And while it is tempting to dismiss lessons that could be learned from such German examples as also being from a different culture, Benson and Hamiduddin (2017) argue that this is primarily a difference of housing market contexts that vary as much between cities as across countries, wondering if such proximal societies are really so different, especially given that in the UK, a new cohousing group is formed at the rate of one a week (Jarvis, 2015: 95). This is reinforced by the fact that while German housing models are perhaps not as communitarian in spirit as Scandinavia, there is a well-established model for *Baugruppen*, (literally ‘building

group') whereby a self-selected group commissions its own bespoke housing development, in urban areas usually in the form of an apartment block (Ache and Fedrowitz, 2012). While on one hand Baugruppen are not directly comparable with cohousing (intentional community is not a central idea, and there is no requirement for shared space such as a common house), their popularity, alongside the existence of numerous housing co-operatives, has resulted in established legal and financial models as well as numerous exemplar projects and support networks that together mean cohousing is easier to achieve in practical terms than in the UK.

As noted in the introduction chapter, I had already made contact with one senior cohousing group several years ago. My intention from a very early stage was to conduct in depth work with one or more groups in the city, so I began with a survey of what groups existed that fit the definition of a senior cohousing group. I used primarily listings and publications by the two key Berlin-based organisations that relate to cohousing: *id22*, who support and encourage a range of 'sustainable' urban living projects and alternative, community-driven housing projects; and *GenerationenWohnen*, a small agency that promotes and offers enabling support for cohousing and other forms of community home building, funded by Berlin's Senate Department for Urban Development and Environment.

In addition to these, I had a range of contacts across Berlin's architectural and community housing 'scenes' over several years of writing on the subject of Berlin's architectural history (increasingly from a social perspective) and through which I had become interested in the many self-built or self-procured projects dating from the late 1970s onwards. The city has a rich history and current culture of such projects, with the *Baugruppen* model particularly prevalent, as a widespread principle of co-developing but also of co-living in various forms (Uffer, 2013).

In searching at an early planning stage for possible projects to study, I also widened my search to encompass groups that did not necessarily 'self-identify' as senior cohousing, or indeed as cohousing at all: community housing projects that might have been established by younger members but who had aged together, or other more recently established groups that did not define themselves by age. I initially contacted and considered a number of groups, including for instance a self-build project completed in the early 1980s by a group who had been

‘officially squatting’ at the time, and many of whose members still remained, now in their 50s and 60s. However, each of these was quickly discounted on the basis of that each still had a significant number of younger members and whose aims were many, but not to grow old together. I also made contact with a number of cohousing groups – most in formation, others who lived together but were not exclusively *older* – from which I made fieldnotes and even recorded some interviews, which while not forming my core fieldwork helped me better understand context. Further, several of these projects involved individuals with direct links to the group that became my eventual focus, and the data gathered are occasionally drawn on directly in the empirical chapters.

Berlin has a significant number of older people’s cohousing groups at various stages of development, so it is surprising perhaps that of the total 200 or so established cohousing groups in the city, there were only two that explicitly defined themselves as older (id22, 2018), and one further group that did not. Neither does Germany as a whole have that many groups, with isolated examples, albeit many are at planning stages (Fedrowitz, 2010; Fedrowitz and Matzke, 2013; id22, 2018). The first of the Berlin projects was the group that opened the introduction chapter, who built an additional storey on a 19th century block, and will be referred to as ‘Group One’. A second possibility arose via personal contacts rather than searching databases. It was a cohousing group that lived as part of a larger housing cooperative, whose members identified as a cohousing project but not as *senior* cohousing, although the members ranged from their late 50s to late 70s, living without children, and will be referred to as Group Two. The third group, slightly further from the city centre and also noted in the introduction chapter, is known as LAiC, short for ‘Living Alone in Community’ and which I identified via the *id22* listings (id22, 2018; CoHousing Berlin, 2017).

Of the three, it began to emerge while I was still at a discussion stage with these three groups that LAiC was likely to form the main focus of my research, in part as this was the group most open to the research, but primarily for the twin reasons that it was the longest established and most explicit of the three about being a senior cohousing group. Although I included all three in the fieldwork, the other two were involved to a lesser extent, providing data where useful on specific themes for comparison or context, and which is made clear in the empirical

chapters. The following is a description of each of the three groups, explaining the context for this decision and the research approach described later.

Group One

The group lives together in a development built in 2011 as an additional storey to an existing 19th century housing block, located on a canal in the south-eastern district of Kreuzberg, a formerly run-down but now long-gentrified neighbourhood. It is the smallest of the three groups, with only ten people in six households, ranging in age from early 60s to early 80s, and whose members comprise a close-knit, life-long friendship group. Unlike Group Two, they had explicitly planned to live together in cohousing for the later part of their lives. The members are joint owners, with different stakes in the development depending on the size of each apartment, but funded, designed and procured the development themselves as an entirely private venture, and thus is closest to the US and UK dominant model of senior cohousing.

Each apartment is self-contained, but the shared spaces include a large open living / dining / kitchen area directly accessing a terrace on the same level, circulation corridors, and substantial roof terraces at an upper level. There is also a small guest apartment. As with Group Two, the apartments and shared spaces are 'intimately' arranged, creating a distinct physical sense of communal living. I had actually contacted the group several years ago (via the architect who conceived of and designed the scheme and who is also a group member), and had stayed in infrequent touch over the period in which my interest in senior cohousing models grew. However, as I stepped up this contact, I began to suspect that the group's aspiration to live socially as a close-knit group had not actually played out as planned.

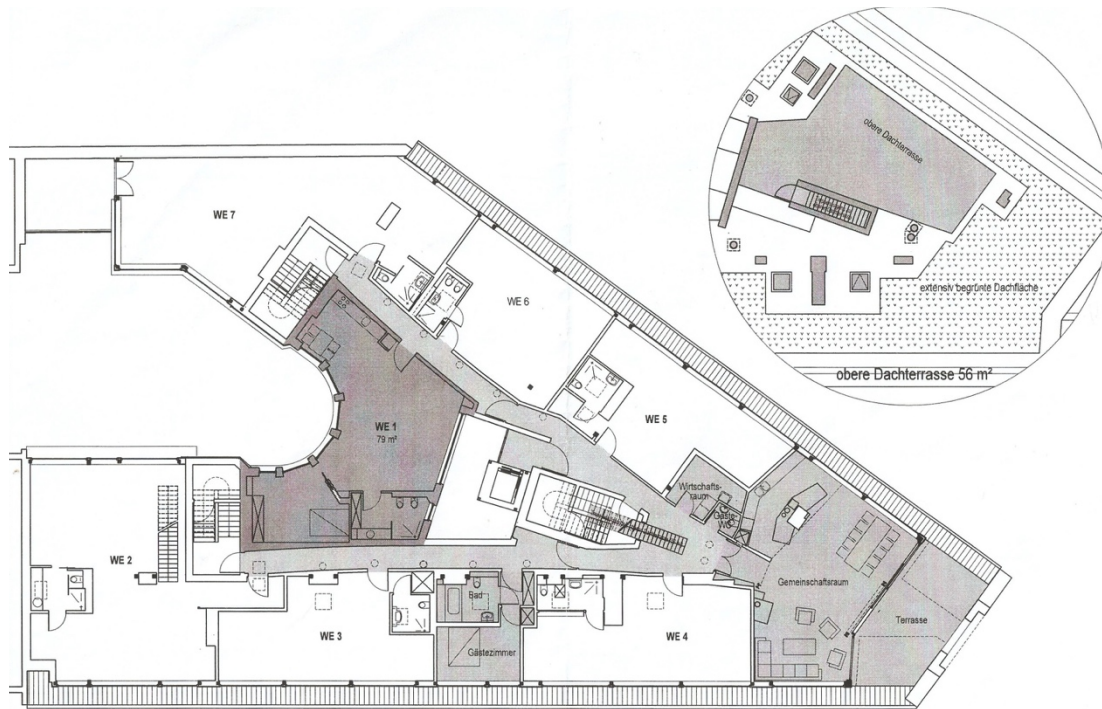


Figure 1. Group One floor plan (and roof terrace). Shared space shown in mid-grey, six apartments (numbered), apartment 1 shown in dark grey.

The group's members are not drawn from Berlin, but all moved in to the project directly from homes mainly in southern Germany and Austria. But more than this, a majority of the group have maintained strong contacts – indeed a sizeable part of their lives – in these other locations, spending much of their time elsewhere. One couple spend more than half the year on their farm in upstate New York. In fact, the roughly seven months of my fieldwork coincided with a period when many of the group were not there at all; in fact the project acts more as a *pied-à-terre* in Berlin, with friends, family and other contacts seemingly in residence as often as the members themselves. I met a few times with my gatekeeper contact, as well as three other members, and carried out several interviews. But while these visits yielded some interesting context and perspectives in terms of helping me focus my approach, and is occasionally drawn on directly in this thesis, in particular in a brief examination of an urban/city location as a 'hub' for such groups. Yet once again, and even more than Group Two, the group's lack of social activity together – the absence of the social – precluded it from being the focus.

Respondent	Age (June 2017)
Male	90
Female	86
Male	79
Female	75
Female	64
Female	75
Female	69
Female	74

Figure 2. Group One: age and gender breakdown, all members. Colours indicate couples.

Group Two

I heard of, and contacted, the group via an architect friend who was involved in the project's design. The group did not identify at all as an 'older' or 'senior' group, and had not registered a presence on either of the two online platforms used for publicising cohousing groups and attracting new members. As my friend put it in one email:

They're not really an old people Gemeinschaft [community]. These people are between 55 and 60, kids just left, and now they would like to share some parts of their life on a pretty practical level.

Indeed, the group did not see themselves as an older group, and had set no age limits but had chosen to form a group without children. His description was not entirely correct though. In fact, the group comprises thirteen people with a spread between their 50s and late 60s, with one in his late 70s, split roughly equally between those working full-time and retirees. On one hand several in the group (including the oldest) strongly refuted that being older played any role in the group's identity. On the other – and as will be explored in a later chapter – there was a wish among some of the older members – even an expectation – to live specifically as a mutually supportive older group, a tension that I suspected remained unresolved.

The group is a so-called WG – a Wohngemeinschaft⁴ or ‘cluster group’ – which in this context described an arrangement of separate apartments whose front doors all lead directly into the shared space,⁵ in this case a large shared kitchen, lounge area and balconies. There are also two small guest rooms off the same central space. The group acknowledged that this could also be described as cohousing but the term was not much used. The group’s cluster actually forms a part of a much larger new co-operative project and comprises three housing blocks each of seven stories. The whole co-operative comprises mainly individual ‘normal’ apartments, but each block includes a cohousing cluster over two or three floors. The other two groups are a wider range of ages, with one comprising two or three families who came to the project as friends, and the third being truly intergenerational ranging between (at the start of my fieldwork) one month, and 71 years. The physical arrangement of each cohousing cluster means that access to and from an individual apartment is via shared space; it is difficult to avoid other residents and communal activity as one comes and goes.

[Figure 3 removed from final version, to ensure anonymity, as references the project name and architect]

Figure 3. Group Two: diagrammatic of ‘cluster group’ within the larger co-operative development.

⁴ The term is also used, confusingly, for a shared flat or house.

⁵ Various terms were used vaguely or interchangeably, even by those deeply involved in the Berlin collaborative housing scene; all seemed to be taken as meaning individual apartments all giving directly on to shared space.

The development is located on the southern bank of the river Spree in a quite prominent location, completed in 2013 (Ballhausen and Kleilein, 2014). The co-operative owns the site, with individual residents having rights to their individual homes as tenants and as members of the co-operative; most are founder members who invested financial capital into the project, their expected return being the right to live in perpetuity with the rent reducing to a level that reflects only maintenance costs. Although the project as a whole has received extensive coverage in local and national German media, especially in the architectural press, there has been no mention of an older group within the development, and as noted above, I only heard of it through a personal social connection. In fact, from my initial contact it quickly became clear that the group sees itself strongly as part of the larger co-operative, with a focus on developing an alternative model of community-based living and housing ownership; my interest in cohousing more broadly in Berlin at the time led me independently to contacts with other members of the co-operative, and it did indeed become clear that social connection between members of this particular cluster group and the wider co-operative were as strong for some as within the group.

I continued contact with the group throughout my fieldwork, carrying out more formal (recorded) and less formal interviews with most of the members, as well as being invited occasionally to eat with the group. Although some individual members responded positively, the group as a whole showed little interest in being involved, due in large part to their lack of identification with 'senior' cohousing at all. They might have, a greater problem was that although there was much day-to-day contact between members – largely because they shared a central circulation space and kitchen area – there was minimal social activity as a group, planned or unplanned, and in fact it quickly emerged that they were not a cohousing group at all in the sense that I understood it. Thus, like Group One, while some of the data I collected is drawn on in the empirical chapters, there was in practice no real 'social' to participate in as an observer, and neither of these two groups became the primary focus of my research.

Respondent	Age (June 2017)
Male	76
Female	67
Female	67
Male	65
Female	55
Male	55
Female	51
Male	62
Female	62
Female	63

Figure 4. Group Two: age and gender, all members. Colours indicate couples.

‘Living Alone in Community’ (‘LAiC’)

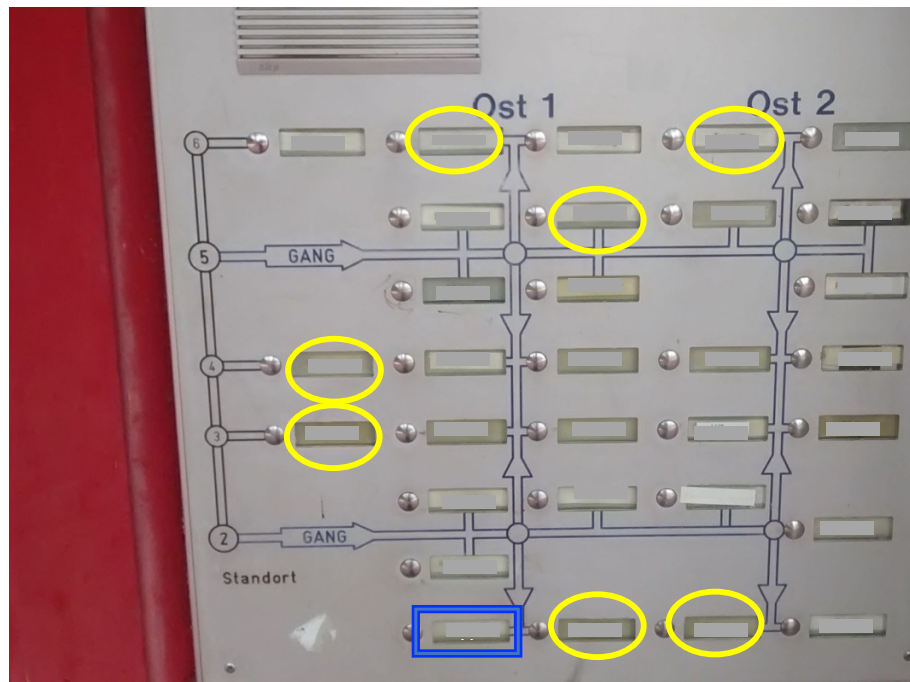
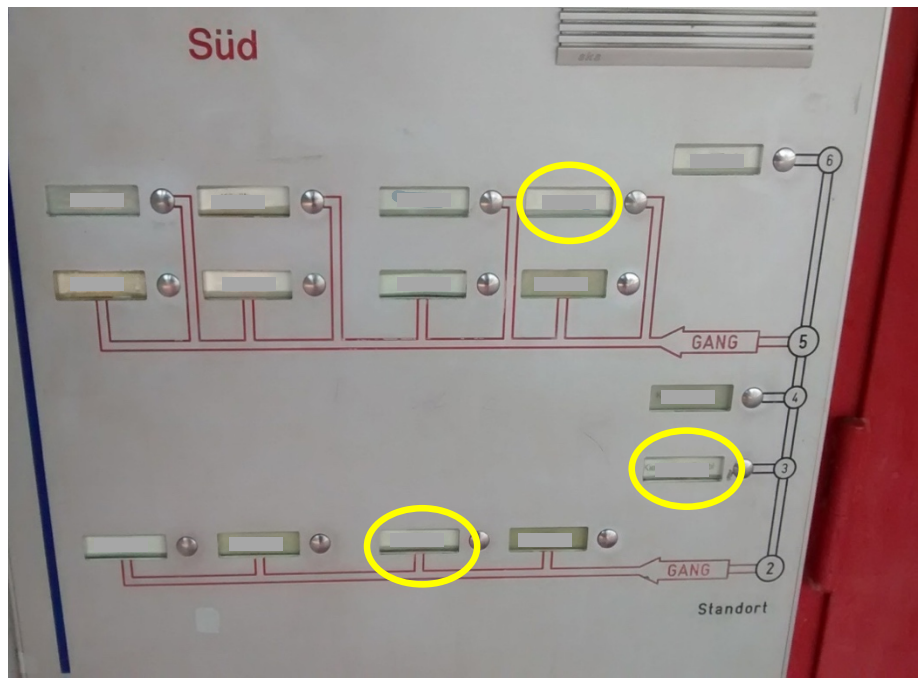
Having moved in together in 2007, LAiC, or ‘*Living Alone in Community*’⁶ was the longest established of the three groups, and was also explicit about living together as an older group. The group also differs significantly in terms of both ownership and the physical arrangement of the housing. LAiC originally intended to buy a site and develop a new-build project in Berlin, but a series of protracted difficulties (chiefly Berlin’s rising land prices in recent years) led to an alternative solution rare for cohousing: members occupy apartments clustered in an existing social housing block dating from the early 1970s, with each member renting their own apartment, as well as jointly renting an additional ground floor apartment as the common ‘house’, with its own garden area giving on to a larger central landscaped courtyard shared with other residents. A fuller explanation of the tenancy arrangements and relationship between the group and the estate’s management company is set out in Chapter 5.

⁶ As noted later in this chapter in relation to preserving anonymity for the group, an English translation *and* acronym is used.



Image 1: Entrance to housing block where LAiC is located.

While this is unusual even in the relatively small field of senior cohousing – possibly even unique in terms of such an intentional community – it does mean that the group’s social existence is in a sense foregrounded: there is no physical cohousing architecture to support LAiC’s existence, or perhaps to conceal any shortcomings behind a (literal) façade of seemingly socially inclusive design. Beyond the joint commitment to the rental of the communal apartment, in effect the project only exists as a *social* commitment by its members. The arrangement also provides an example of one possible approach to ‘retrofit’ senior cohousing, whereby more groups might adapt existing buildings, or even more formally cohere existing proximate communities. The effect on the social dynamic of the group from its physical arrangement thus forms a part of this study; not an architectural evaluation as such, but an exploration of some of the potential advantages and barriers to the potential success of such groups in this context.



Images 2 and 3: LAiC, door entry system.

Images show the two parts of the door entry system at the main staircase entrance, to indicate the relationship of apartments. The main staircase accesses the ten LAiC flats in the block (yellow circles), and the common flat (blue rectangle), to indicate their physical relationship. Verticals are staircases – the vertical in each image numbered 2-6 is the same staircase, showing floor numbers.

The other staircases lead to emergency exits only: all the flats in the images are accessed via the main staircase entrance. The other three group members live in other blocks which are a few minutes' walk away, and are not immediately connected or adjacent.

The thirteen individuals in the group comprise ten women and three men, whose ages range from 67 to 79. They live in 12 households, and are all originally from Berlin. Initially a majority of members were not keen on the estate and neighbourhood that is now home, but after the disappointments, cost and challenges of previous plans, combined with a number of inducements from the local authority, the location was accepted, and is apparently now well-liked by all of the group.

Name (pseudonym)	Age (June 2017)
Roger	67
John	79
Alison	77
Janet	74
Tina	69
Jill	76
Wendy	73
Amanda	74
Pauline	71
Rosie	75
Beth	68
Judith	68
Clive	74

Figure 6. LAiC: age and gender, all members. Colours indicate couples.

3.4 Perspectives on Germany and Berlin: acknowledging difference

Much of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 – especially that on theories of ageing identity, care and social connection – could be framed as tending to either ignore potential differences, or at least makes a tacit assumption that cultures and care regimes are broadly comparable across countries in the developed world. In seeking to learn lessons for the UK, it is important to acknowledge the place specificity of the study, not only specific to Germany, but to Berlin: a country and city with its own social, economic and cultural approaches and regimes around the themes discussed in Chapter 2, not least around housing and community. This section deals briefly with some of these potential differences and their relevance with respect to the aims of this study.

Social connectedness, and differing social care regimes

While there are extensive literatures on social connectedness that compare different European countries, there is a lack of literature that directly compares between the UK and Germany, especially in terms of social and familial support structures. Part of the problem in terms of social and cultural comparatives around ageing, is that the most significant source of data - SHARE (the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) – does not include the UK in the 29 countries studied over the past two decades (SHARE-ERIC, 2019). Often, comparative studies of social capital and networks in later life exclude Germany (cf. Fagerström *et al.*, 2007) or the UK (cf. de Jong Gierveld and Tesch-Römer, 2012).

However, useful data and literature does exist. Ellwardt *et al.* (2014) find that (drawing on data across 27 European countries) that economic inequality plays a significant role in the extent of social capital for older people, and thus is a more unequal problem in the UK than Germany. Scherger *et al.* (2012) judge that the English-language literature on care and social connection in alter life is overly focused on the concept *structured dependency* (noted in Chapter 2); that greater socio-economic equality in Germany compared with countries such as the US and the UK has resulted in a different relationship with work and social engagement past retirement age. Kohli and Künemund (2010), in a rare comparison, note that although across north

European nations co-residence among adult family generations has greatly decreased, 'togetherness', i.e. adult children living relatively close by, is a stronger trend in Germany than the UK.

The same authors acknowledge the problem of comparative literature around informal care and social connection across European nations, noting that while there is a well-developed literature '*on welfare states and family regimes [...] few studies have focused on social networks*' (Kohli and Künemund, 2010: 142). Pichler and Wallace (2007) take a similar view, acknowledging that in fact the commonest approach among scholars has been to associate patterns of social capital with the different welfare regimes in different parts of Europe, thus relating social capital '*to the conventional typology of "worlds of welfare capitalism"*' (2007: 425). Thus it is productive at this point to briefly summarise Germany's differing health and social care structures, and to also note differing attitudes to the system among Germans.

It is undeniable that the UK and Germany have quite different health and social care regimes, with the former – using Esping-Andersen's (1996) typology – a *liberal welfare regime* and the latter a *corporatist welfare regime*. Germany has no NHS as such, with a statutory health insurance scheme, that is also mandatory for pensioners (Blümel, 2013). Similarly, Germany has a system of mandatory long-term care insurance (LTCI) that is intended to cover basic needs (unlike health insurance which covers all health costs); there is a means-tested scheme for all additional costs, which are otherwise expected to be met by the individual (Arntz and Thomsen, 2010). While the LTCI is administered by health insurers, the care funds themselves are independent self-governing bodies (Forder and Fernandez, 2011). However, like the UK, not all long-term care costs – which includes accommodation – are not covered (Robertson *et al.*, 2014). Further, although the German government has thus far avoided a care crisis, addressing deficits in the long-term care insurance fund in recent years, concerns remain about the sustainability of this approach in the longer term (Blümel, 2013).

In comparison with the UK, the German social insurance system is more directly linked to the contribution of kin as care-givers, to whom payments are made directly, in contrast to the indirect allowances made in the UK (Robertson *et al.*, 2014). In fact, childless individuals are required to pay slightly more in insurance contributions than those with children (Forder and

Fernandez, 2011). Despite this, Leitner (2003) and Hoffmann view the outcome in terms of paid support for kin in both countries as closely comparable – or at least equally as poor, in comparison with Denmark, Finland and Sweden. And while Germany's health care and social support systems are generally regarded as superior in many ways to that in the UK or England (cf. Robertson *et al.*, 2014), a comparative study of public *trust* in the system between Germany, the Netherlands and England / Wales finds that surprisingly, Germans have the *least* faith in later life home care services, with half the level of trust recorded in England with regard to nursing homes (van Der Schee *et al.*, 2007).

It is also difficult to compare pension income between the two countries – the German system is effectively a mandatory private model administered in a similar manner to health and care insurance contributions (Kohli and Künemund, 2010). Yet while there has been a greater rise in pensioner poverty in the UK than Germany, in the latter nation there seems to be a greater fear of it, at least as measured by media interest and political attention to the issue (Scherger *et al.*, 2012), indicating that in the context of this study at least, we can assume that in both nations income in later life for many remains a comparable concern. Of course, in the UK home ownership plays a very different cultural and economic role in an individual's retirement planning, and potentially in funding late-life care (Elsinga and Mandic, 2010). It is notable though that even in Germany, whose economy is not exempt from the move towards less permanent, structured employment, there is consequent trend toward property ownership as an individualised approach to funding retirement (Kramer and Pfaffenbach, 2015).

Yet despite these significant differences in care regimes and in other related issues such as pensions and retirement planning, the UK and Germany are generally placed in the same group in studies that consider formal care regimes across Europe in comparison with that provided by family (cf. Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Saraceno and Keck, 2010; Blümel, 2013; Hokema and Scherger, 2016).

Returning to the field of social connectedness among older people in the two countries, the literature presents a similar overall picture of group the UK and Germany together in the European context. Reher's (1998) work on the nature and extent of family ties in Western Europe set a widely agreed framework that draws a distinction between

southern/Mediterranean European states – where close family ties dominate – and northern states where the extent of family ties is less prominent in social and supportive networks; de Jong and Tesch-Römer (2012) further draw a clear line between north-western and eastern Europe in the same context. While Pichler and Wallace (2007) acknowledge the underlying complexities in trying to make such broad differentiations, they nonetheless group countries into categories of Nordic, Western-Central and British, Eastern-Central and Southern. Supporting this broader picture, Kohli and Künemund (2010), in a survey of social network extent in later life, draw out defining trends in northern Europe that include higher divorce rates and smaller family size leading to substitution of traditional family support with stronger friendship bonds, and the positive social effect of increasing involvement in the labour market to a later age.

Moving to the theme of informal care by kin and non-kin, Hoffmann and Rodrigues (2010) note more similarities than differences in terms of informal carers, noting the UK and Germany as highly comparable within the Northern European clustering of care norms: the two countries similar in the proportion of family members that provide care, and to a similar level and intensity (in comparison with southern Europe). Huber *et al.* (2009) in a wide ranging statistical analysis note that the UK and Germany are similarly close in terms of a number of factors, including: that both nations have similarly ageing populations, with the ‘care ratio’ – those in middle age caring for the over 80s rising at similar rates; the proportions of carers that are children, partners or non-kin respectively; the gender balance in caring (and that carers are more likely to women, with men ‘catching up’ in later life as primary carers for partners); and interestingly, a similar level of belief in both countries that ‘*dependent people have to rely too much on relatives for care*’ (2009: 57).

Neighbouring and neighbourhood connection

Given the nature of this research as an enquiry into intentional *neighbourhood* – projects that implicitly seek to form stronger supportive social bonds in later life than would otherwise be the case – it is also necessary to consider the social norms or expectations of neighbourly interaction that might be specific to Berlin or Germany. As with issues of care and social connection discussed in the previous section, it is difficult to make clear and direct comparisons

between nations or particular cities. Strobl *et al.* (2016) – in a study of community structures and neighbourhood characteristics as they relate to the participation of older adults (mainly but not exclusively in urban areas) in southern Germany – acknowledge that there might be significant variation in findings in other regions of Germany (while drawing on a predominantly English language – north American and northern European – literature, and being typical in making no distinction for location).

Berlin in turn is in some ways a typical continental northern European city – for instance in its high density and apartment living, in other ways unique in its social and urban history (Mayer, 2000; Bodenschatz, 2013). Even then, there are local variations, not least the differing cultures of communality and neighbouring that evolved separately between the two state regimes that existed independently in Berlin in the post-war period (Rada, 2013). The locations of the three groups are themselves quite different in terms of the potential for neighbouring interaction: as will be described later, Group One's members have very little interaction with neighbours (none have roots in the city, and the built form is that of a penthouse, with direct lift access inaccessible to the rest of the block); Group Two enjoy significant social interaction with others within the larger co-operative, but the whole development at present remains stranded as an island in a non-residential area. LAiC, with one exception, also arrived at their location with no local connections, and are a white, middle class older group in a predominantly poorer, Turkish-German neighbourhood, albeit have developed extensive neighbourhood connections through volunteering. Finally, it might be questioned whether these particular situations do not prove more relevant than broader Berlin or north-East German neighbouring cultures, given that all members of the three groups originate from 'the west' – there are none who lived in the East German state for any significant period, with Groups One and Two including members from other countries, even from other continents.

Studies of neighbourhood social interaction and social capital in Berlin tend to focus understandably on issues of ethnic and class diversity impacts (cf. Beer and Musch, 2002; Schnur, 2005), or the impacts of gentrification (cf. Bernt and Holm, 2013). Schnur (2005) in a study of social capital among neighbours in the Berlin district of Wedding describes the location as very similar to (this study's location of) the districts of Kreuzberg and Neuköln as areas of post-industrial redundancy, long-established lower-income immigrant populations, national

and international incomers, young professionals with few roots in the area, and gentrification. Seemingly also comparable with parts of London or other UK cities.

While treating my own anecdotal experience with understandable caution, I would also note that during the research period, I was also able to draw on my own experience of neighbouring norms while living in these same Berlin districts over several years and in London and other UK cities. More formally, it is worth noting here that although I have not drawn on the material significantly in the empirical chapters, I did carry out a number of interviews with other older members of groups at planning stages, and including some who had lived in community-led housing projects since the 1980s. Reflecting on the data from these, it is notable how much discussion was around neighbourhoods and a sense of disconnection or even exclusion with their locale as they grew older, especially in districts such as Kreuzberg notable for their young, transient populations. From both my personal experience and from the interview data, it is fair to summarise that the experience of older individuals in these contexts – of personal connection to others in the neighbourhood and relationships that might offer support (reciprocal or otherwise) seem broadly comparable with the UK – or at least residential districts of London, where I had previously carried out a study with two groups, including interview material on these same themes, and noted in Chapter 2, section 2.4.

In conclusion, this section has acknowledged the many cultural, social and structural differences between nations and locales that require care in interpretation of data and in making comparisons for England or the UK. Throughout my research and analysis I tried to remain mindful of such differences, while also recognising the great number of similarities in selecting data.

3.5 The particular challenges and limitations of ethnography with LAiC

My initial contact with LAiC was through details given me by *Generation Wohnen*, which led to an initial meeting with two members of the group, one of whom (Alison) became my gatekeeper to the rest of the group (and, as it turned out, had been agreed in this role by the group). I had outlined my research idea in an email, but with limited detail; that first meeting was primarily a chance for me to better explain my research, and for the group to meet me and subsequently decide whether they would be willing to become involved. The first meeting went well: the two members were keen to tell me about the group and its achievements, and I was keen to put them at ease in terms of my own intentions. We had met at LAiC's 'site', i.e. in the common flat, so I was also able to learn something about how the group used their shared space, and get an idea of the spatial relationship of the members' housing locations. Subsequently I had a further meeting a few weeks later – more of a friendly chat – with another member of the group at a local café, who I sensed was personally interested in meeting me and gaining a first-hand account of what I might be up to.

I followed up these with a more formal description to the group of my research intentions, including an outline of my ethical approach (particularly regarding anonymity) and the broader themes of my enquiry. I had put much thought into this, trying to be attentive to the potential intrusion of such work, and drawing on experience with the two groups I had worked with the previous year in London (hoping to learn from mistakes I felt I had made there), but also to the work of the ethnography work in the field of communities of older people previously described. Jennie Keith, in her study of a much larger retirement community outside Paris in the 1970s, writes at length on the challenges of becoming immersed in the social life of the fieldwork setting and building relationships, trying to be a participant in some form while also covertly observing. She describes how she:

... wrestled with the problem of explaining what I was doing there. Explaining myself and my research seemed suddenly appallingly difficult. How would they feel when I said I had come to study them? How could I avoid the superiority, the impersonality, the threat to privacy often suggested by that proposal?

Keith, 1982: 27

From my initial meetings I had an outline idea of the group's life together (and also to a lesser extent of the other two groups), and had planned to immerse myself as far as they would permit in their everyday lives. I had asked (at that point still to be confirmed) if I could attend the group's weekly 'Plenum' weekly business meetings, as well as more informal events – I knew that they had a monthly date for group outings, usually a day of walking trips outside the city, as well as more irregular social events, dinners together and so on. I also hoped to 'hang out' in the common apartment on agreed dates and times, hoping to meet with multiple members of the group and chat informally. Most of all, I hoped to have the chance as often as possible to cook for the group in the common apartment – something which I understood happened sometimes, albeit less often than the group itself had originally intended. I had set up and run a catering business, bakery and café in Berlin a few years before, and intended to draw on these skills.

As outlined earlier in summarising my data collection, I was successful – especially with LAiC – in obtaining significant access through a range of activities beyond more formal interviews. There were some disappointments however, the primary one being that the group actually did less together, as a full group, than had been my initial impression. It also became apparent quite quickly that the shared apartment – in which I had foreseen myself hanging out and meeting members unplanned – was not used in that way. Both of these issues became in themselves data and will be explored in detail in the empirical chapters. Likewise, the fact that the group as a whole was unable to agree to my regular attendance at the weekly Plenum meetings (albeit I went to a few by specific invite) became an illustration of the group's approach to its consensus process of which I was initially unaware, later emerging that one or two members had vetoed my inclusion. Nonetheless, talking to individual members regularly allowed me to gain a sense of the content and dynamics of these meetings.

Despite these limitations, the ethnographic extent of my work remained both substantial and critical in informing the development of my thinking throughout the fieldwork period allowing me to learn much about the group and the everyday aspects of its life together, become more at ease with the individual members, and to underpin the thread of my structured interviews.

3.6 Insider / outsider status

As previously noted, a number of researchers have raised the issue of the role and position of the researcher themselves in the context of research with older people (Jones, 2006; Grenier, 2007), arguing that 'old age' is at least in part a co-production of social reality between participant and researcher. Tarrant (2016) describes her position as a younger researcher interviewing older men as 'betweenness', able to build on some commonalities but also making use of the significant age differential to in some ways appear as an 'acceptable incompetent' (Lofland, 1971) – as someone assumed totally unable to understand the experience of ageing, and to whom such experiences must therefore be explained carefully. I found the role of 'acceptable incompetent' an easy one to play, and I was sometimes able to fall back on the excuse of my lack of academic background as the reason for the occasional faux pas.

Yet although my focus in considering such issues of 'positionality' in planning the fieldwork had been directed at age differentials, in practice age per se was much less of a factor; certainly many of my (previously unexamined) prejudices around older people quickly fell away as I spent more time with the group members. Also, there is undoubtedly a significant difference between a young researcher in their twenties, for whom someone in their 70s is a separate species, and someone (in my case) in their late 40s, for whom the potential vicissitudes of later life, in my case through having far more experience of care and support for older relatives, has become something much more real.

Instead, to some degree the different cultures of the UK and Germany played some part in marking our difference (despite my several years in Berlin, I realised how much of a bubble this had been). But most prominent was gender, or rather its intersection of age and generation. There was an understandable reticence by *some* of the women in the group – as noted, the group is predominantly female – to be open or at ease with me in a way that they perhaps might have been with another woman, and I was perhaps naïve in not appreciating this fully prior to the research. I return to reflect on this issue as part of the conclusion chapter. Both Grenier (2007) and Lundgren (2013) – although writing about researcher-participant age differences – recommend seeking out and building on common ground to form positive

relationships, being in some ways an insider, but remaining attentive to the ways in which one is not. Despite some indications at an early stage that some of the group did indeed wonder ‘what I was doing there’, over time it became clear that I shared with many of the group something fundamental: namely a deep interest in questions of ageing and community. All of the group were in person friendly and (almost) always forthcoming about everything I asked, and over time I believe I came to share a humour and understanding with a few members of the group; I remain in touch with LAiC via these contacts (and also with several of the members of Group Two).

3.7 Interviews

While I briefly considered discussion groups, I felt early on that a combination of my own language skills (trying to follow multiple threads and mediate in a group) and LAiC’s seeming unwillingness to participate ‘formally’ together in such a way, precluded this. I did collect *some* data from situations such as informal lunches together, or social discussion evenings that were anyway planned by the group. However, a particular incident at the latter – where not all of the group had agreed to my presence and thus it was agreed I would not record or take notes – emphasized to me the difficulty of such an approach. One-to-one interviews gave me a much clearer, calmer way to investigate issues with individuals, where both of us felt more relaxed and less under pressure, and on more than one occasion members felt able to confide things in me that they seemed unwilling to share with the group.

Although I had previously lived in Berlin for several years, it is important to accept that my written and spoken German will always remain a ‘work in progress’. While younger Germans very often speak English to a very high level, this is rare among older people, and aiming to undertake the research in English was never a realistic possibility. LAiC members, as the main focus of my research, were a mix, occasionally speaking English but much more comfortable in German. I was helped with a ‘soft landing’ by the fact that my key contact and gatekeeper to the group had reasonable English and was keen to improve it – sometimes our one-to-one chats would range between both.

At an early planning stage, I did consider using an interpreter for at least some of the more in-depth interviews, but after some initial pre-fieldwork meetings with the intended cohousing groups I discounted this idea; the barrier imposed I judged to be far greater than any language deficiencies I might find later on, would be of little use in a broader ethnography of informal hanging out, and would anyway complicate epistemological issues around semantic meaning (Edwards, 1998). This on balance proved to be the right decision: although I sometimes struggled, participants were sympathetic, and language often became a useful tool for talking around an issue, sometimes exploring the use of words under the 'guise' of linguistic explanation. Further, I was forced to listen more than I might have done in English; I often felt that while I paused to understand or find the right words, the participant would fill the gap with more information than I had expected.

Although I had regular conversations with individual group members that were usually not audio recorded, at the core of the data collection were two waves of interviews for the LAiC group:

1. At an early stage – from around two weeks in, and in all but two cases after I had already met the participants informally
2. At a late stage of the fieldwork

Although in practice with some stragglers, and one or two intermediate interviews, each 'phase' took place over a period of six or seven weeks, overlapping with the other groups and occasional interviews elsewhere. Interviews were from one to two hours, occasionally longer. My original outline plan was to undertake interviews with all members of both the other groups; at an early stage I realised that this would be neither necessary nor practical (especially given the Group One residents' general absence), although Group Two were more accommodating and I have a more closely comparable set of interviews for many of the members covering the same themes that I explored with LAiC. A schedule of all interviews and a summary of other data collection is given in [Appendix A](#).

O'Reilly notes (2012: 124) that interviewing as part of ethnographic research is not a distinctly separate activity from participant observation, and goes on all the time in one form or other.

She also argues (2012: 127) that interviews as part of ethnographic research are crucially different from other forms of interviewing, in that they involve people that the researcher knows and has built trust with, and are essentially a co-production of knowledge between the researcher and the researched. Although this was true much more meaningfully for the second round of interviews, the first round served in two ways: as data collection but also as a way for individuals to get to know me.

The first round of interviews was semi-structured, following Lofland (1971), exploring individual's backgrounds, personal histories and attitudes prior to and outside the cohousing group. Several members also expanded into other reflections and issues around the group and their lives there: although I was to some degree flexible, at that stage it was necessary to restrict the interviews largely to what Hochschild (2010) describes as 'guided conversations'. I was interested in biographies both as personal narratives of identity but also how ideas of home and housing histories fed in to each individual's stories of how they came to be with the group, following Plummer (2003). In attempting to reconstruct these personal histories – and the history of the group – I acknowledge the limitation that such a process is partial and reflective of the subjectivity of an individual's memories, and also often a part of that person's making of identity in the present (Andrews, 2012). I recorded two additional interviews with two founder members focussing on the inception of the LAiC group and the 'basic framework' of its history, to avoid elongating other individual interviews.

My second round of interviews were in general longer and in more depth, in part because by that stage I knew the individuals better, building a better degree of trust (O'Reilly, 2012: 124), but also because I had questions from far more material gathered over months. It also helped that my language and way of speaking with the group had improved; although from the beginning I had learned some specific vocabulary, it was more a way of speaking that I developed, methods of working around trickier linguistic bits to allow space for the participant and go deeper.

Large parts of these latter interviews were less structured giving an opportunity for the participants to talk in much greater depth about their lives and identities, experiences, and reflect on and interpret events (Holstein and Gubrium, 1987: 121). Lofland distinguishes this

as a separate approach, oriented to exploring the reasons behind data gathered through initial ‘casual’ conversations and from the on-going participant observation, to explore *‘instances, episodes and problems ... and how they are dealt with’*, and to construct records from this (Lofland, 1971: 8). O’Reilly stresses the importance of unstructured interviews (2012: 120), as something that encourages reflexivity by the participant, and the chance to learn more about life from their own perspective. In practice, there may be a balance to be found at different stages, with a need to be attentive to individual personal relationships and not to make assumptions that what one individual finds acceptable as a line of enquiry is acceptable to all, and also of the need that ethical consent in ethnography is not a single point at the start, but is to be renewed and considered with each individual as the field work develops (O’Reilly, 2012: 66).

More so in interviews than in the wider observation of the fieldwork, I remained strongly aware of the co-construction of meaning between two individuals as a process: on one hand I was open with interviewees about my own interest in and support for the concept of collaborative housing done by older people, and I strove to remain sensitive to such issues and my own role in shaping the narrative (Dunne et al., 2005; 2002). As the fieldwork progressed, I also became aware of a particular outcome of my own position in this sense, that while the ‘world’ of cohousing and ageing studies dominated my own life at the time, the existence of LAiC was perhaps only one of many elements in the lives of its own members. Thus, I attempted to remain attuned to those members’ perspectives, and conduct my analysis in that context.

3.8 Ethical approach

Ethical approval for the research project was given by the UCL Research Ethics Committee at the end of March 2017 (see [Appendix B](#)), and my initial fieldwork started shortly after this. I initially wrote a summary of my planned research together with a participant consent form in English, which was subsequently translated by a professional translator, and which included discussions with me over specific points. I was able to pass a copy of these to my gatekeeper at LAiC for discussion with the group; the approach to the other two groups was less clear cut, and was done on the basis of direct contact with individuals, taking copies with me to each interview. For the latter two groups, and for other individuals outside of these, I was generally

able to explain my research and gain consent at the time, made simpler by the fact that I was generally not pursuing the ethnographic approach with them that I was with LAiC.

At LAiC, I met with the whole group initially (and after introduction by my gatekeeper) to discuss with them my intended research and issues of consent, prior to asking for signed agreement. This initial meeting was rather stilted as I had worked out beforehand what I intended to present, and I think that all of us felt self-conscious at the situation; I was surrounded by all of the group members, and it was less free and conversational than I had hoped. At the time, the group seemed unanimous in its agreement to my proposal. Afterward, I learned that one member of the thirteen had declined to take part in interviews (although as previously noted, was happy to talk when 'out in the field' on days out). There was a risk here, given such a small group, of that person feeling pressurised as I knew who they were by a simple process of elimination, even though my invitation to take part had been made via my gatekeeper, rather than me working through a list of names. In practice, I believe that the person in question did indeed feel pressure to take part, but resisted, and perhaps this served as a reassurance to the rest of the group that not taking part was unproblematic. I was intent to assure all the members that they were entirely free not to take part, and as importantly to withdraw from the research at any time. I tried at all times to be open as far as possible about the themes of my research, including presenting this to the group as a whole in the first few weeks. A copy of the initial participant consent form is included in [Appendix C](#).

Ultimately, the limitations that the group placed on my participation, most notably in not being allowed to attend the weekly Plenum meetings as a general rule, is in a sense proof that the group did not feel forced into anything, albeit this was less fortunate from my own perspective. Toward the end of my fieldwork, several of the members confided to me, surprisingly, their feeling that I could have been more forceful with the group over this issue. While I cannot see how that might have been appropriate, in re-reading my reflexive diary notes from the period, it is clear that this was of some concern to me at the time; in retrospect what I might have done was explored with my gatekeeper the reasons for such distancing by the group, which might have allowed me to reassure individuals about their individual concerns. I wonder now if the group felt that having taken a 'position' on the issue of involvement, they felt it hard to

soften on this later on, even though my relationship with the individual members had grown far more trusting.

Anonymity for participants was an issue that although seemingly straightforward at first, I wrestled with at a later stage of the research. I agreed with each individual that their data would be anonymised, i.e. that actual names would not be used, but that what they said might be published as part of my PhD thesis (to be available online) – I also agreed that I would consult with my gatekeeper further if planning to publish separate articles that used data from my fieldwork, either academic or in the media. However, two issues remained: firstly that given the small size and closeness of the group, individual members might be able to recognise each other from the descriptions (albeit that the text would be in English); secondly that data about the group as a whole might be shared by others outside of LAiC, given that the project is the only Berlin group of this kind that would fit the detailed description necessary here.

While there is information about the group in the public domain already, LAiC members have been unhappy in recent years over how they have been represented in some cases in the media. My agreement with the LAiC group, whose data forms the large majority of my findings, is that throughout this thesis I have referred to the group by its acronym in English translation only. While it is an easy task for a researcher or someone who knows the group to identify it, this usage will deter internet searches in German by group name, for instance by journalists and media organisations.

I have previously described my at-times complex negotiation with the LAiC group in particular in terms of the extent of access to their lives the group might agree to, and the eventual limitations on this. Throughout, I tried to maintain an informal approach that recognised the ‘power asymmetries’ inherent in such relationships (Dunne *et al.*, 2005), and tried to remain sensitive to unintentionally making participants feel pressurised in any way. The issue of consent, especially for the LAiC group, is perhaps the most prominent of these, in terms of potential harm done.

3.9 Data organisation, transcription, translation

Field notes were recorded occasionally at the time or just after the event, but mostly later the same day, prompted by much shorter notes taken at the time, and usually aided by phone images; often I would be with the group on 'days out', which made it easy to take frequent snaps as we explored the countryside, and which as able to use as aide memoirs. I also kept a reflexive diary in parallel to this, which I found useful to record on alternate pages of the same notebook (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). As O'Reilly notes (2012: 102), field notes are critical in ethnography as part of the inevitably messy process, and I reviewed and referred back to these as the field work progressed, informing the later interviews and providing a useful feedback system to review the direction of enquiry.

Although I wrote fieldnotes mainly in English, occasionally using German to capture specific words or phrases, much of the interviews and most conversation generally were in German, as previously noted. I had intended to transcribe all of the recordings myself, but it became clear within one or two weeks of my first full interview that this was impractical; what had seemed clear face-to-face was less so listening back, and I was quickly overwhelmed (although my language improved greatly over those initial weeks). I therefore chose to use a transcriber, a German based in the UK (and paid for with funds allocated originally for an interpreter). This was not a decision that I made lightly. The process of turning speech 'as heard' into written text is not a mechanical process, but, as Hammersley notes (2010: 9) one that involves an interpretation and selection of language that attempts to more clearly convey what was said than a literal record of verbal sound. However, I was lucky in finding someone with whom I quickly found a good working relationship and who quickly became familiar with the participants and the themes of my research, so that details and queries around the transcripts could be discussed. The fact that each transcript was produced far more quickly than I could have done alone – usually within days – meant that I could listen back to the recordings soon afterwards and add further notes to the transcripts. Further, as a German, my transcriber was able to add notes herself explaining cultural nuances that I had not always noticed, and on one occasion being able to understand and transcribe a south German accent with which I had struggled.

Translation as a process was of equal or arguably greater importance, both in terms of the approach to the process, but also to the analysis stage at which it was done. I chose to translate all material myself, as critical to ensuring continuity of meaning throughout. I have some experience of German to English translation, having translated two volumes of architecture and planning history respectively, and even from these had become sensitive to the idea that there is no 'neutral' translation: that a translation of language also involves a translation of cultures and social understanding. As Temple and Young note (2004: 164), all sociological approaches to the production of knowledge:

... acknowledge that your location within the social world influences the way in which you see it. If you subscribe to this view of social reality, then translators must also form part of the process of knowledge production.

Translation is thus not a matter of dictionary terms, but an understanding of field, the position of the researcher and of the power relationships inherent within the research. In short, the translation process – like the transcription process – is not a separate function of the research, but an intrinsic part of the process. I was aware throughout the whole analysis of the risk of each 'process' moving me a step away from the original context and setting of the interview material. Although I undertook the coding process in English, much of the material I 'doubled up' (with the German version included with each coded extract) so that I was able to refer back to the original, as well as any notes, throughout the process of analysis. The English-version transcripts were kept in 'raw' version (not improved with English phrasing and style) to retain as close a version as possible; I only reworked these into a more fluent English version in the later drafts of this thesis. I have worked to find a balance between a Germanic phrasing and 'overly polished' English that risks losing the nuance of what was said. Where appropriate, I have retained German words or phrasing, with an explanatory footnote, that I hope gives an indication of my approach. All quoted material was originally spoken in German, unless where stated.

My data analysis began with a thematic analysis of all the material from interviews and fieldnotes, as well as occasional media coverage of the groups (mainly of LAiC) and other written documents (Boyatzis, 1998). These themes developed primarily in response to my

research questions, but others also emerged, most prominently in the area of the relationship between group members and those outside the group, especially with family members. The data was coded using Nvivo software, with an iterative approach in which I often returned to printed versions of the original transcripts and other material to review. The main thematic areas were generally a reflection of the volume of codes and relevant material; from these I proceeded on to a separate stage of manual analysis, printing a copy of each of the themes and analysing these initially with a mind map from each, before arranging and reviewing the material in detail. This process was sometimes repeated, with material sometimes discarded where I decided certain themes had inadequate data or were not central to my research questions.

Thus the systematic process of analysis formed the basis for the findings that are presented and discussed in the empirical chapters of this thesis. As noted in the introduction chapter, one of the most prominent documents that came to the fore during the fieldwork was the LAiC group's manifesto document (referred to by the group as 'the flyer') which represented both the original aims of the group when first formed, but has also formed a useful series of touchpoints against which to set much of the analysis in my empirical chapters. The next short chapter sets out the details and implications of this document.

Chapter 4: What LAiC set out to be: the manifesto

As noted in the introduction, LAiC concluded its formative discussions with a written document of its aims and aspirations. LAiC members refer to this as a ‘flyer’, as it has been printed and circulated as a promotional tool primarily aimed at potential new members, but in effect it is also the group’s manifesto: a written representation of its founding principles. More than a decade later, members often differ in their opinions on various aspects, and partly as a consequence of this there have been numerous amendments at intervals throughout LAiC’s existence (which is sometimes of note in itself and is commented on in later empirical chapters). The flyer is thus the closest possible representation available of the group’s intentions when it first formed; according to two original group members the flyer was evolved during a series of meetings and workshops by all members of LAiC as it existed at the time (albeit only a handful of these still remain members). The aims set out in the text chime broadly with the principles of the senior cohousing movement, and the flyer remains a relevant document for the group: the passage of text from Saint Augustine at the end of the flyer is framed and hangs in LAiC’s common apartment.

Thus the document is highly relevant to this thesis, and is set out in full here with the intention both to set the scene in terms of the group’s original aims, but also as a basis to explore how other social processes have complicated these ambitions. At some points themes explored in the empirical chapters relate directly to specific aims stated in the flyer; at other times themes that emerged are considered as less directly connected, but in the broader context of the flyer’s underlying implications, primarily as issues that challenge LAiC’s intention to sustain a mutually supportive community.

The original German version, in its presentation form as a flyer, as well as later iterations of the document are included in [Appendix D](#). Text that was later removed or considerably shortened is shown in green. The comic sans font of the original (and all later iterations) is retained below, to relay as closely as possible the intended effect.

The LAiC (Living Alone in Community) Housing Project Group, Berlin

We are a group of 11 women and men, currently (September 2004) aged between 54 and 70, from across the whole of the country, who are striving for an intergenerational, rental-based community in Berlin. Each of us wants to live in an individual apartment, but within a block with a shared common space.

We were founded based on the model of the Dresden AWiG association ("Growing Old in Community"), which was featured in *Publik Forum*, an ecumenical journal of critical Christians.

Predominantly Christian, we are open to people with different ways of life and worldviews. We want to lead a mindful, ecologically sustainable life with a social commitment.

Community

The following elements are important to us in the planned household community [Hausgemeinschaft]:

We aim for a housing community that differs from individual homes or other forms of living such as assisted-living, serviced apartments, retirement homes and so on, but above all through a community life that goes beyond informal neighbourhood contact, to have the necessary organisational solutions, e.g. being independent, self-governing, and involved in the shaping of the community.

In addition to the possibility of retirement in our own flat, a common form of life is important to us. Community spaces, regular binding/compulsory meetings and joint ventures serve this purpose. We live in a self-chosen neighbourhood, which has been brought together through various longer processes, and which above all [resulted in] shared goals.

We value the stimulus of community life and want to make it active and not "cared for", even at an increasing age. "Housing communities are think tanks - places that invite everyone to live out their creativity" (D. Fuchs / J. Orth, Moving to a New Life). You are needed [by others]; you are not just a set of needs. The existing individual skills of the residents will be drawn on meaningfully together.

In contrast to 'assisted living', serviced apartments and so on, we intend to support each other if necessary, even if someone becomes housebound temporarily or for a longer period of time. Following the motto of "Not alone and not in a home", we want - if/when help among ourselves is not enough - to avoid institutional care if possible, with home-support-care services that we have chosen.

We want to avoid loneliness through a common lifestyle and thus contribute to the preservation of our mental and physical health, as proven by scientific studies.

In contrast with life in an individual home, we value the security and safety of the community. It should never be that a sudden illness goes unnoticed and that there are serious consequences through lack of help.

Through making use of mutual assistance, care and nursing costs are saved.

Independent

We want to shape our communal as well as our individual lives into old age, in a self-determined way.

We want to live in apartments - not in single rooms, where we can retire. Being alone is possible without needing to be afraid. In contrast to living in a Home and a supervised lifestyle, our

independent way of life, without a predetermined daily routine, avoids unnecessary dependence on care contracts and care costs.

Politically-socially engaged

In Rio de Janeiro in 1992, 170 countries signed Agenda 21, a program of action for the 21st century with the aim of integrating economic, environmental and social concerns worldwide. Local Agenda 21 aims to implement "sustainability" at all levels in the field, in collaboration with the municipal administration and active citizens, groups, associations, initiatives, ie. should be promoted, which has a long-term future.

In the foreseeable future, demographic trends mean that the current models of caring for the elderly through nursing care will become unaffordable. Our group is part of an innovative housing policy based on self-help and self-organization; the model reduces social costs as an alternative to expensive traditional institutional care and seeks to promote awareness of this in local communities. We will become socially responsible for [the group's] proposed residential neighbourhood.

Ecological

By sharing rooms, appliances, cars, etc., individual resource consumption is reduced to the benefit of the environment. The members of the housing group commit themselves to the economical use of water and energy.

Economical

We want to live in affordable rental housing and will be able to cover the cost of living by sharing equipment and the like. Share and thus reduce.

Taking the burden off relatives

Our living arrangement takes the burden off relatives, who not only know the group through the members but also have the certainty that we are actively involved in a reliable community.

Advantageous for landlords

The landlord gains a stable, reliable group of tenants, leading to low turnover. Its administrative burden is lessened by the self-organization of the group in the rented flats, since it regulates its own co-existence, even in the case of conflicts, and in addition searches for its own replacement-renters [Nachmieter]. The group has a positive social impact on the whole neighbourhood.

Cross-generational

Self-determined housing in old age means that you start early enough to consider how and with whom you want to spend your last years. Many people think "it's not that time yet", but actually when it is "time", it's usually too late.

What we are seeking can be summarized by this excerpt of St. Augustine's (354-430 AD) Confessions (Conf. 4.8.13):⁷

There were other things in them which did more lay hold of my mind
—to discourse and jest with them;
to indulge in an interchange of kindnesses;
to read together pleasant books;
together to trifle, and together to be earnest;

⁷ An English source text has been substituted here, rather than a direct translation of the flyer (Augustine and Pusey, 2013).

to differ at times without ill-humour, as a man would do with his own self;
and even by the infrequency of these differences to give zest to our more
frequent consentings;
sometimes teaching, sometimes being taught;
longing for the absent with impatience,
and welcoming the coming with joy.
These and similar expressions, emanating from the hearts of those who
loved and were beloved in return,
by the countenance, the tongue, the eyes, and a thousand pleasing
movements, were so much fuel to melt our souls together,
and out of many to make but one.

As noted earlier, the aims set out in the flyer are not intended as a rigid structure for this thesis, but as reference points and a useful framing of themes that emerged from the research – sometimes considering how the reality has been negotiated differently, but at other times assessing whether a particular issue was included or foreseen by the original group at all. Thus while Chapter 5 begins with the formation of the group and the biographies of the individual members, it reflects not just on LAiC's intention to be open to people of '*different views and beliefs*' but also the broader question of whether a specific kind of person might be attracted to such projects. In exploring this issue of individual motivations in joining, the chapter also considers LAiC's intention from the beginning to be explicitly an older group, and what this means in terms of ageing identity.

The question of how difference is negotiated within the group – *to be open to other ways of life and worldviews* – is returned to in Chapter 6, through an examination of the conflicts experienced by the group, and how these have resolved into the present social dynamic. It leads on from this to examine the everyday life of the group in the context of LAiC's intent to be a community that is more than just 'good neighbours' and which is to be achieved through formal and informal socialising toward shared goals (and which is a key principle of all cohousing). I would argue that the original text leans slightly further toward closeness of community than some of the writing on senior cohousing has suggested is the ideal; the

passage of Augustinian text hints at something more, not closed to the outside world like a monastery might be perhaps, but nonetheless a kind of ersatz family who share a life together. In examining both the successes and the tensions within the group, the chapter considers in effect the extent to which the flyer – in this sense a blueprint for how the group should live together and what it should achieve – contrasts with the lived reality. The final part of Chapter 6 addresses the issue of LAiC's existence in an existing housing estate. It is clear from the flyer that the physical cohousing model was always an important principle – individual apartments *'within a block with a shared common space'* – both in terms of the group's shared life but also as an assertion of independence, to live *'without the supervision often associated with housing for older people, but also independent and in control, albeit as a rental-based community'*. The question asked here is to what extent such a retro-fit arrangement might impact on these aims.

Chapter 7 continues the examination of the group's social dynamic in the context of LAiC's broad aim to be a mutually supportive and close community, but from the different perspective of relationships with those outside the group. It begins with the group's specific aim to be socially committed to engage locally, to counter the risk of becoming a gated community or insular group, but also to promote the model of senior cohousing in this way. Yet beyond this, the flyer makes little mention of members' existing lives and social networks beyond the group (except in the context of 'removing the burden' from family), perhaps implying that LAiC was foreseen as the primary social focus for the members. True or not, the chapter considers the complexities and competing demands of such relationships in the context of the group's social coherence and sustainability. In doing so, it also allows a deeper exploration of what the group means to its members in its aim of reciprocity and mutual support, and how this group's commitment to these is negotiated with members' wider lives.

Chapter 8 is the chapter that perhaps relates most closely to LAiC's explicit aims around mutual support and care, and especially in relation to health. The flyer is explicit in aligning itself with the aims of senior cohousing in terms of looking out for each other, of avoiding the need for *'unnecessary dependence on care contracts and care costs'* and of planning how to avoid institutional care as far as possible. Once again the lived experience of the group is examined in the context of these aims. Finally, I would argue that through the use of the terms *intergenerational*, *cross-generational*, and especially through the flyer's final paragraph, the

group were keen to consider issues of long-term continuity of the venture, and this is used as a touchpoint to consider issues of sustainability, most specifically the complex issues of recruitment of younger members.

Finally, it should be noted that ecological sustainability and use of resources were clearly an important ambition for the original group, and they do have a shared resource of clothes washing facilities by using the bathroom in the shared flat. However, LAiC's particular version of the retrofit arrangement has restricted the possibilities for ecological sustainability to an extent that it did not emerge in this research as playing a significant role in the group's social life together.

Chapter 5: LAiC begins: origins, membership, motivations



Growing old in community

Two friends would like to meet others, to dream, discuss and plan the possibility of a “Growing Old in Community” group, preferably in Berlin (for possible model see [this magazine] 18/03, p.20). Curious and interested? Phone/fax [....]

(Original classified ad that led to LAiC, Summer 2002)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with the story of how LAiC originally came together as a group and came to be in their current location – a process that moved from an initial idea by some of its founder members, to a quite different scenario in terms of finding a home for the project, with a loss of much of the original membership as a consequence. In part this is scene setting: it is important to understand the context in which the manifesto was written, a defining set of expectations against which the realities of an evolving group over the years can be considered.

The chapter goes on to assess who joined the group, including both the original members (those still in the group) and those who came later. Obviously such data has little statistical use

even in the small realm of senior cohousing, but it once again helps to provide context for some of the issues associated with the group and this form of living together that will be discussed in further chapters, and to some extent considered in the context of comparable data from other studies, in the conclusion chapter. However, the central focus of this chapter is to explore the motivations of the members for forming the group – but also of those who came later. While the original manifesto appears to represent a quite clear set of aims, the individual motivations of the residents – whether founders or those who came arrived over the subsequent years – do not necessarily correspond neatly with the aspirations set out, and are often more complex, or relate to other factors altogether. These motivations are on one hand considered against some of the motivations suggested in other research and touched on in the literature chapter, for instance a realisation that a previous residential location or housing choice has left someone geographically isolated from family and friends. But I also examine some of the members' attraction to such a group from other perspectives, considering individual backgrounds but in the context of identity both as people of a similar age (cohort) and of a specific generation.

Thus the overall aim of this chapter is to look back to the start of the group, to provide an initial sense of the group and its expectations of life together, probing particular the context of particular themes that emerged and are explored further in the chapters that follow.

Finally, it should be noted that there is an inherent difficulty in attempting to explore the motivations for all of the members given that some are recalling (or remaking) narratives from over a decade ago, while others are relatively recent arrivals and whose experience is far fresher in their minds. I have tried as far as possible to take this into account, an approach in which I found it useful (in the structured interviews) to prompt individual recollections using text from the flyer itself, to recall their original thoughts in relation to the set of aims that for most would have been used in their decision making at the time but has been given much less thought since.

5.2 LAiC is conceived

LAiC was in effect founded by Roger and John, inspired by a scheme they had read about in a magazine article about a project established in Dresden a few years earlier (and in which they subsequently placed the ad noted above). As Roger recalls:

We were immediately struck by the idea. I remember thinking “that would be just right for us!” We don’t mess around, so a few weeks later we placed an ad [in the same magazine] looking for people to do something similar here in Berlin.

Although I also draw on the recollections of the other surviving original members (John, Alison and Jill) – i.e. those who were members of the group at the time it moved in – Roger is quoted more often here as he was my primary source for the group’s history and ‘keeper’ of the group records, with a small archive of documents and photographs. Stories relating to the early days of the group sound not untypical for cohousing groups generally – with very similar experiences to current comparable groups in Berlin contacted during the fieldwork for this research, and also to those in the UK (cf Fernández Arrigoitia *et al.* 2015, 2017; Hudson 2017). The group began with regular open meetings for anyone interested; 35 people came to the first one. But as Roger recalls:

At every meeting there were new people, so we always had to start from the beginning. Finally we said “Enough! Closed!” There were 14 of us who knew we were serious, and we said “We need to get moving now. If there are problems, we’ll sort them out along the way.”

LAiC’s original plan was also the ‘traditional’ cohousing approach: to locate and purchase a suitable site in Berlin, commission a development team and create a purpose-built housing complex whose design reflected the specific needs of the group. Like the Group One and Group Two projects, the scheme was to comprise a ‘cluster’ model of individual self-contained apartments arranged around a large communal space that included a kitchen. The huge challenges for a group (of any age) trying to achieve the cohousing goal of a new built project have been discussed in Chapter 2, and were no different for LAiC, despite such arrangements

being far more common in Germany than in the UK. Various options were considered: funding the scheme directly and privately (the 'Baugruppe' model pursued by Group One); a co-operative where each would help fund the build, but then pay rent to the co-operative (i.e. the Group Two model); or – a strong preference given the range of incomes among the group members – a development funded and built by a housing company, in which the LAiC members would be renters only.

This last option is, in Germany, not as highly unusual as it would be in the UK. In fact, another cohousing group is currently involved in developing a project on the same estate as LAiC, to be built and managed by the same housing company. Nonetheless, finding such a sponsor was hard, and all of the possible models LAiC had considered were pursued to various extents. As Roger described it:

... this was a few years back, so there were still vacant sites in Berlin. But either it didn't suit everyone – site too dark and cramped, wrong location – or more the case, it was the money ... too expensive, too expensive, too expensive! None of them worked for us, although many were successfully built as co-operative projects [by others] in the end.

In November 2006, after four years together, over which period a core group got to know each other pretty well, a final project fell through due to the rising cost of the forecast rent levels and of the co-operative share element. For LAiC, it was the project that had come closest, and represented a huge amount of investment in terms of time, effort, money and stress. Many in the group regarded this as the end. But, as Roger recalls, very shortly afterwards a new option came up that hadn't been considered before: moving into an *existing* building in what was (at the time) a less desirable district in southeast Berlin:

Around that time, I'd been talking to [someone I knew] who worked as part of the [estate] community, who said "Oh, come to us then!" saying they had vacant flats for rent. We were all incredibly disappointed that our scheme had fallen through, as we really thought we'd be living together by Christmas [2007]. The only problem was, that when I told the others about the idea, at that time very few people wanted to live in the [estate] district or Neukölln.

So strongly did most of the group members feel in fact, that most bowed out, leaving a group of only six – this despite an offer from the estate management company to fully renovate each of the flats taken by members, and even to add new balconies for two of them. As Alison recalled:

This was a good offer from [the housing company], they had a 10% vacancy rate here then, not like today! [laughs] They wanted people like us here, to get a mixture. But most still said “No, we can’t move in here.” I wasn’t keen [on the area] myself, but some of us decided “if we don’t do anything now, the group will just break up.” So it was settled: “We’ll start here.”

The group finally moved into its new home on the estate in the autumn of 2007 – actually the same time that they might have moved in to the previous scheme had it come to fruition. It was still not a straightforward process: as one member sharply corrected me when I referred to this as a ‘much easier option’, each person had to co-ordinate selling or ending long-term rental agreements on their own home, downsizing their possessions, and in most cases renting temporarily while renovations were carried out to their new homes. Yet in comparison this *was* a more straightforward process than LAiC’s earlier plans, and above all an affordable one. Roger concluded his ‘founding story’ with a reflection on this that seems to run counter to the picture of senior cohousing in the UK thus far:

Old people are interested in rental accommodation. Old people do not want to join building groups [Baugemeinschaften]. Yes, it’s partly a money thing, but it [does] depend simply on the whole challenge, the questions you have to deal with: “Where is the property?”, “When does the builder start?” [laughs] That’s not an old person’s thing. Actually, most people really just want to stay in their old apartment [laughs] and [form] the cohousing around it. They want to stay in their neighbourhood, in their surroundings, where they know the newsstand and the bus stop and so on.

Yet while the focus in the UK literature has to date been on those who have succeeded (or attempted) to build projects using the substantial economic and social capital, as well as time, available to wealthier baby boomers, LAiC perhaps represents an alternative for those – as will be returned to below – with less of some of these resources.

5.3 A note on LAiC's tenancy arrangement

The whole of the housing estate where LAiC is located is owned and managed by one of six housing companies owned by the Berlin state (Berlin Senate, 2015); the companies have a degree of autonomy however and are perhaps more comparable in their operation to the UK's 'registered providers' such as housing associations rather than local authority council housing. According to several members of LAiC, each rents his or her own apartment through a 'standard' rental agreement with the housing company. Perhaps surprisingly, the shared apartment is formally rented by one member (Roger), again under a standard rental agreement, with a written agreement between the other LAiC members to pay into an account specifically for LAiC costs. I am not certain of the legal status of this latter agreement between Roger and other members should a member default, but it is certain that there is no legal contract with the housing company that recognises LAiC, thus each LAiC member has only the rights of any renter in Germany – albeit that the tenure is significantly more secure than in England – and the group having no legal control over future allocation of apartments.

According to a contact I spoke to at the associated Berlin government agency *Netzwerkagentur GenerationenWohnen*, the offer of the apartment renovation when the group first moved in, and even the informal offer to treat LAiC as a group at the time, were both highly unusual, and represented a flexible approach unlikely to occur today. This earlier, more flexible housing allocation possibly was to some extent aligned with a broader German policy shift whereby social housing provision by the state has over recent decades moved toward privatisation and residualisation (Droste and Knorr-Siedow, 2011); the housing company in question has in the past sought to extend allocations to a wider range of residents to achieve a greater 'social mix' on estates such as LAiC's (Droste, 2017), where the residents had been predominantly low-income ethnic groups (generally Turkish-German in this case). However, the new Berlin administration elected in 2016 came to power on the promise of a strong response to the rising

housing crisis, following significant public protest (Holm, 2017), and the new senate set tighter rules for rent increases generally, but also stricter rules for tenant eligibility in subsidised housing and housing under its direct control, including the six Berlin state-owned housing companies (Berliner Mietverein, 2017). The new rules attempt to cap rent increases for new rental contracts across both private and social housing provision, but for the city's publicly owned housing companies also set a requirement that a minimum of 50% of newbuild apartment lets and 60% of new contracts in existing housing stock must be provided for those eligible for social housing from a means-tested waiting list (Stadentwicklung Berlin, 2017).

While in theory the housing company remains able to negotiate bespoke arrangements like LAiC's, in practice this seems less likely. In fact, throughout my time with LAiC, a major theme of conversation was the difficulty that Judith (who had separated from her partner Clive and thus had moved out of the estate) was having with re-applying for an apartment in LAiC's cluster, or indeed on the estate at all. She explained to me that under the new Berlin government's rules, she did meet the requirement as on a sufficiently low income, but had not been assessed as having 'housing need' and had thus far been ineligible. Similarly, a newbuild development by the same housing company on the same estate, that includes a cohousing scheme (and is noted elsewhere in this thesis) will also be subject to these rules, to the frustration of some of the cohousing group members who, after several years of involvement, find themselves no longer eligible as residents.

Further, although no members of the current group were allocated their current apartments on the basis of a means test, the general view of the group was that few if any would be able to afford a new non-subsidised apartment (i.e. from the 40% of new contracts at the discretion of the housing company). More than one member told me that they actually would prefer a smaller apartment, but to downsize within the block, i.e. to begin a new rental contract as a non-social housing tenant, would be prohibitively expensive to them.

The subject will be returned to in Chapter 7 in terms of LAiC members' engagement locally, and which also acknowledges that LAiC do exercise some limited degree of informal control through very active membership of the residents' board on the estate. According to Wendy and others, LAiC tend to dominate the board due to a lack of interest by other residents; the

group's effectiveness in this was demonstrated by the fact that, toward the end of my research period, Judith was successful in obtaining a recently vacated apartment within LAiC's cluster.

5.4 Who joined LAiC? Individual biographies and backgrounds

Since those original six members moved in just over a decade ago, the group has expanded to thirteen people: three men and nine women, with two couples (albeit the couple that comprises the two most recent arrivals has split since joining the group), and the remainder being single women. All are ethnically white, in contrast with the predominantly (although by no means exclusively) Turkish-German population on the estate and the wider area, albeit that the area is increasingly known as a 'hipster' location where historically, lower rents have attracted younger, fashionable residents that has in recent years resulted in rapid gentrification.

Of the original six, one member left the group, and another – the husband of one of the remaining members – sadly died two years ago, the first such loss to the group. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the membership changing and expanding over the ten years since the group moved in (with the most recent arrivals around two years ago) the average age is also now ten years older, i.e. the new recruits have on balance not been younger than those already members. The age range has also remained roughly the same, with a fairly even spread between 67 and 79 at the time of the fieldwork.

As previously noted, the *original* group members also shared – in fact were brought together via – a broadly similar religious outlook. However, this was definitely not true of later arrivals, and while there were tensions ostensibly around this (as will be explored in the next chapter) the group does not now regard itself as formally religious.

Yet moving beyond such 'basic facts' to explore who the members of LAiC are, and what motivated them to form or join such a group, becomes a more complex task. While the structure of the rest of this chapter reflects an attempt to separate different aspects of personal biography from motivations to join the group, in reality lives are not so clearly

divisible; social class, working lives, income, gender, relationships and housing pathways are all closely intertwined to being an individual to their current moment.

Class, education, professional lives

It was quickly clear on spending time with LAiC, or indeed with members of other groups within the 'orbit' of the Berlin collaborative housing scene, that such projects are largely (although not exclusively) an educated, middle class endeavour. In LAiC's case, a majority of the group were educated to degree level (or beyond) or had an equivalent level of education and professional training, including two doctorates. A notable exception in the group was Tina, who although she feels differently now (a thread that will be explored in a later chapter), she admitted to feeling out of place when she first joined the group:

Everyone in LAiC is highly educated and studied and so on. I never studied. I only did my eight years of secondary school. There were times when I never trusted myself to say things, because I thought it would make me seem ... [pauses] ... "lower class" or something.

All of the group had worked for most of their adult lives up to retirement, but at the time the group moved in together in 2007, all were retired or semi-retired except Roger, who continued to work for three or four years. At present, all are fully retired except Alison, who continues with part-time work related to her career as a psychologist. On one hand, it is understandable for someone older to refer back to a past where they felt they were a more engaged, a more 'valuable' member of society. But on the other, talking about careers and professional lives with the group was a reminder of how central these are to our identity. It was also at times a sharp reminder that I was no 'clever researcher' observing intellectually incurious participants; in a conversation with Pauline about the struggle I was having with transcription, she agreed that:

- P: Yes, I know, terrible. I had to do a lot of interviews for my doctorate and transcribe everything.
- J: What was it about?

P: It was about the potential of communal politics, [...] about the energy in communal politics and also citizen involvement. What comes from... not top down, but bottom up. So the field was communal development strategy and is really development concepts: urban development concepts, city development [...]

Although there were 'outlier' professions (Beth's was the most unusual path of the group, having run a small farm in Spain prior to returning to Berlin being the most unusual) what was striking was the dominance of the health and caring professions: of thirteen, two (medical) doctors, a psychotherapist, four others who worked in care or related social work, and three in areas of pedagogy that included a senior sociologist. While it has been noted that senior cohousing groups often 'cluster' around a particular profession primarily as it also reflects that recruitment is often through existing social networks (cf Fedrowitz and Matzke, 2013; Labit 2015; Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015), the members of LAiC considered this professional 'theme' a coincidence; it does seem true that it was neither planned, nor related to the connections that brought any member into the group.

However, it is interesting that the original group membership was recalled as being less dominated by this theme, with more members who brought skills or a professional interest in the 'development' aspect of the project. It is also notable that for Group Two especially, the two members who instigated the group are architects, heavily involved both in the project's design/construction and also in the sphere of collaborative housing more broadly; they are not regarded as being 'tied' indefinitely to the group as a social entity, and are thought by others to likely start afresh on a (third) new project elsewhere. Their focus thus seems to be as much on the project as development process, echoed at Group One by the fact that the instigator and 'prime mover' is also an architect and designer of the project, and who was quite open in about having focussed much of his time on the process, only to be disappointed that the group did not live fully together as he had hoped.

Wealth, income

The predominance of social and care-related professions at LAiC, despite the required level of education, also reflects that the members are less wealthy than owner-based developer groups might be. The various life paths that in many ways – predominantly education – imply a relatively middle-class status have not led to significant economic resources in later life for many of the members, despite the professional backgrounds. There is also some degree of disparity in retirement income and economic assets in the group now, and for which housing pathways of individual members are relevant. Several of the members *were* previously owners and especially for those who came to the group as couples, selling their property has left them better off financially than others who have long rented – albeit that the latter is both more legally secure and socially accepted in Germany than in the UK. To some extent this is reflected in the members ‘cutting their cloth’ in terms of apartment size, which range from essentially bedsits to spacious two and three bedroom apartments. The situation is complicated by the fact that those who came to the project earliest received a much better deal in terms of rent level and space than those who came later; a consequence of rising demand in the neighbourhood. One member admitted to me that her apartment is much too big for her needs, but that downsizing to a smaller apartment in the same block would mean in effect applying afresh, and paying a higher rent.

At no time did I detect any tension or resentment around these disparities though, and my initial impression was of a group who were ‘comfortably off’. I was later disabused of this though; a strong conversational theme throughout my fieldwork period – albeit mainly not one relevant beyond this particular situation – was the recent introduction by the Berlin government of stricter means testing for social housing eligibility, whereby both housing need and income would be assessed. I had accepted the line of one or two members that this would pose a barrier to LAiC acquiring new members; another member sharply corrected me that firstly one or two existing members might well have qualified, and secondly that just because potential applicants were on low incomes or had few assets was no bar to them being a valued member of the group.

Gender, marital status, children

It is impossible to ignore the fact that gender, marital status and children are factors closely related to income or extent of economic assets in later life. Of LAiC's thirteen members, ten are single women, and of these only one does not have children. Further, with one exception (Alison, whose husband died while a group member, around two years ago), all those with children have been single, most having raised their children alone and lived independently for many years. On one hand, the group demographic in this context reflects a broader demographic trend for post-war generations in western societies generally: each generation less likely than their parents to have remained married. On the other, it is much more accentuated here.

Every one of the women in the group has worked all their lives, and could be described as spiritedly independent. Yet working was as much through necessity as choice, especially after partners had left the scene. While some – such as Beth – seem to have been able to pursue relatively independent lives, it is clear that for many of the group life has not been particularly easy, and raising children on their own has reduced their available resources to an extent that was not the case for the couples (the latter of whom were also largely the homeowners).

Life stage opportunity

Having given an impression of members whose life chances have been limited in comparison with others, LAiC also represents a group of people who have made use of a window of opportunity in their lives, which is less open to the increasing numbers of those who comprise the 'sandwich generation' of having to support both adult children and ageing parents. At the time of my fieldwork, only two members still had a parent living, in both cases in some form of supported care accommodation (although as at the end of 2018 neither had survived). This is perhaps unsurprising given the current age of the members themselves. Yet very little mention was made of caring for ageing parents when members related aspects of their lives to me. And in both cases it seemed that other family members (a brother and a sister respectively) had taken on a greater caring role, or at least the contact as the person who remained living close by. Instead, when talking about the decision to join (or form) the group, often made in their

late 50s or early 60s, there was a striking sense of opportunity as members related their housing decisions. As Jill recalled:

My husband died relatively early, when my daughter was eight years old. We had our life – school, study – then suddenly she was grown up, gone. When I finished with work, I thought, “Do I still need a house, or could I do something different?” And so I went to Berlin.

Tina told a similar story:

... the building that my [rental] apartment was in was sold, and made into luxury ownership apartments. And my daughter was grown up. I had no home, no job, and no child anymore! So I was free!

In fact the transition to retirement was generally presented to me as an opportunity rather than in response to any negative connotations of ageing. One older member of Group Two described how he and his wife, both now in their 70s, were firm in claiming their reason for joining the group had ‘nothing to do with age,’ but was a lifestyle choice that ‘we would have made in our thirties’. Except, that is, for the lifelong restrictions imposed by careers:

We always wanted to move back to Berlin, but we couldn’t both find posts together... So we worked separately in [city] and [city], and ended up visiting at weekends. But then in 2014 we finally moved together to Berlin to live in this WG [Group Two], which our professional lives had always stopped us from doing.

Indeed, for most of the LAiC group, the factors that had tied each person to a particular mode of life played a key role in decision making: no longer tied to work, to the location of work), to raising children, or to supporting older parents themselves.

An important final point is that at the time the group moved into its home in Berlin, and for all those who joined subsequently, none had grandchildren, nor had expected them. Yet at the end of 2017, the LAiC group had thirteen grandchildren between them (to eight of the members). It seemed that a grandchild ‘wave’ of the last four or so years had been born almost

entirely to older parents, i.e. in their 40s, and over-representing a broader demographic shift that has occurred since the members started their own families. This is a significant theme that will be returned to in Chapter 7.

In summary of this section, while acknowledging that any biographical data gathered on such a small group – a small subset of an already tiny subset – will always be atypical in one sense, the membership of the LAiC group does hint at possibilities for slightly wider inclusion than has thus far been the case especially with the ‘traditional’ owner-developer model dominant in the UK. It seems that while the group is admittedly ‘middle class’ by education and often profession, this belies a greater variance in actuality, with older women who have fewer economic assets represented. At the same time, the members have also taken advantage of an opportunity during what may have been a relatively short window in their lives in which they have found themselves with the ability to join such a project. The rest of *this* chapter will examine the role of specific motivations among members for joining a senior cohousing project.

5.5 Motivations

The LAiC flyer was quite specific about its central aims, namely to live together as a group of older people thus avoiding potential loneliness and isolation, and to provide mutual support as far as possible into a fourth age. Yet when I began to talk to members about their own reasons for joining the group, I noticed in open questions how little the ‘straightforward’ aspirations of the flyer were referred to, or at least how individual motivations were a far more complex interplay of factors that sometimes had no direct connection to ageing at all. This section begins by discussing some of the more practical attractions for members, before moving on to perhaps less-acknowledged aspects choice such as the maintenance of a distinctly urban life, before exploring more deeply the role of ageing identities in choosing such a group, including the often-asked question of why choose to live *only* with other older people.

Geographical isolation, long distance relationships

Of the thirteen current LAiC members, seven are from Berlin or its surrounding region, the remainder from locations around the former West Germany. Many in the group have travelled widely, with some having lived and worked abroad, meaning that their social connections and networks are often highly dispersed. Beth is perhaps the most acute example, as someone who has spent most of her adult life living in other countries, with much less social connection to Germany and Berlin as a consequence (the main exception is her daughter who has moved to the city from elsewhere). For Beth, geographical isolation had become a real problem:

I lived in Spain alone and in a pretty old primitive house – 800 years old. The neighbours were 5 or 6 km away. That means I was totally alone. I had to do everything alone. I realised then that my eyes were a bit worse, my hearing worse and my strength also not so great. Then I thought ‘perhaps I need to move on now’.

If such relative isolation for some was a ‘push’ factor, the chance to live at the other end of the spectrum – in a proximate community where social contacts are literally next door – was the pull factor. Even for those, as is the case with several LAiC members, where family and friends might be in the same city or region, lack of immediate proximity can be an issue. Alison, who lived much of her life in a Berlin suburb, recalled:

I had friends of course, but you had to take the train to the city... much easier if you can just knock on the next door. [...] And my best friend lives in [West German city], which is two hours away at the weekend. There’s the phone and email. But really you still need to see someone, to speak *directly* to someone. Simply, it [the motivation] was to be in a *local* network of people, who I can do things with. And another thing, I thought... in old age, short distances to live. [I want] short travel distances, and if I want to go to the countryside, I can sit on the train. But for proper contact, what’s important is that I can be there quickly.

In fact of the group, seven have lived much of their lives in the Berlin suburbs or nearby settlements, while the remainder were from further afield around Germany (excepting Beth, as noted above). In other groups, by comparison, the situation is the same or even more

pronounced: in Group Two, five of the ten members are not originally from Germany at all; Group One are largely from southern Germany and are now in a sense even more dispersed, with more than one member living part time in another country.

Of the LAiC group, none has ever lived so centrally in Berlin; only two members of the group have lived relatively centrally in any other city before. When talking about this geographical theme as a motivation, although it's clear in Beth's case for instance that her decision to move was a very practical one, the way that members' moves were talked about tended to move much more quickly toward the benefits of life in such a central, urban location – something that is discussed in more detail toward the end of this chapter. On one hand, some members portrayed their move to LAiC and the city as fitting with their particular needs at a particular life stage – Roger and John seem to have enjoyed their previous lives in a town near Berlin. As Roger described it:

[...] we always liked to do something new every few years. Then we moved to [town], felt very comfortable there – I was also active in politics in the council, we were active in the church community – we felt comfortable there. When his [John's] mother went into a home, we – no children – thought “what about the city”. If you wanted to do something – cinema, theatre, performance, we had to go to Berlin. It was only 30 km, but it was always a big hassle. John doesn't drive, then in the winter with the trams and... then when we read in the Publik-Forum [magazine, article about the Dresden group] and thought: “That would really be something for us!”. So we simply started, and advertised. We sold the house [...] and moved to Berlin.

But on the other hand, some hinted that they might have made such a decision much earlier in their lives, with more than one member talking about the suburban locations of previous parts of their lives in unflattering terms. Often this was linked to the need to raise families, and as previously noted for most of the members the decision to join LAiC was after their children were no longer dependent on them – and before any hint of grandchildren.

The location of members' children was a more complex negotiation in terms of motivation than the issue of geographical isolation. As noted, grandchildren had yet to play a role at the

time most of the group were forming their plans, and for most were even an unexpected later development. While several of the members have children in Berlin, for at least three of the group joining LAiC meant leaving behind grownup children elsewhere. Tina for instance had been conflicted in making her decision, since her daughter (and now grandchild) are in another part of the country. But she relates how:

...I always wanted to go to Berlin. And when it [redundancy] happened, I took early retirement and came here, because my two sisters, and a lot of friends are here.

Wendy, originally from Bavaria, but whose daughter has moved to a city in another part of Germany, found herself in a similar situation. In recent years she has thought about relocating there – she feels she could help with childcare for her daughter and son-in-law who both work, but she admits that although there are some groups ‘a bit like cohousing’ she has no other contacts in the city and would find the move too great.

In the end, it is hard to summarise the motivations of the members. Each has a different as a clear narrative around negotiating friendship and particularly family relationships in respect to distance; the subject remains complex, and I suspected was further muddled by the inevitable merging over time of the nature of those relationships in the present.

On one hand the choice to move to Berlin, and to join the group, was often presented in purely practical terms: that it was impractical to live close to children who were themselves likely to move again, and members seemed keen to present their decision as a ‘simple’ exchange of physical and geographical isolation for a community of neighbours who lived literally next door. My attempts to pursue the theme deeper often drew a blank. Prompting members to talk about the flyer’s call to *take the burden off relatives* in the context of how close they chose to live to their children drew little response in the context of motivation to join the group. There is a strong possibility here that my question was taken as being implicitly about health-related care; while an idea of remaining strongly independent of children in later life *might* have played a part of motivations when still a relatively abstract idea, it had become more difficult to

acknowledge now that the issue of care was a more immediate one (and is a theme explored in depth in Chapter 8).

One or two members spoke of rejecting their parents' attitudes in terms of such locational decisions, but in contrast with the detailed critique of their parents' personal choices that was a theme in the groups I spoke with in the UK, responses in LAiC were more of a blanket rejection. Wendy seemed puzzled that I sought to compare her own choices with those of her parents:

They... well they were different people, it was a totally different generation... from before the War. They never would have thought of a thing like this, or living differently. For them, *Heimat*⁸ was much more important.

What can be said of the group as a whole is that there was little sense of being bound by tradition in terms of family structures or remaining close to family members; members' independence in this sense was notable as being taken entirely for granted.

A choice to age in the city

While most of the group made no mention of ageing as a motivation prior to moving to LAiC, the group's relatively central location in a major city has sometimes worked as a magnet effect; not all of the children noted above grew up in the capital, and more than one has moved there *since* their parent moved into LAiC. Such decisions and relationships are complex and are the result of many factors, but this effect seems to work on multiple levels. Janet described how she sometimes visits her son (in another German city), but that '*he's much more often here. Berlin's a big draw for him. It's a base. You can go off and do all kinds of things.*' Group One, whose members moved from Munich to Berlin in order to form their group, were much more explicit that the location (in another central Berlin borough) was high among their motivations:

⁸ The word has no exact English translation, representing 'homeland' or an emotional attachment to place, which in the context here was used slightly dismissively, I think.

[...] our children are all over [the world] now, it's quite global. Some in Munich, but all over – the US, Australia. So if we're all going to live together, why not live somewhere [...] that the kids actually want to visit. Berlin you see, it's exciting, for them it's so cool to visit. Would they come if we lived in ... [thinks]... Mönchengladbach!⁹ I'm not so sure. Not so often, anyway.

In fact, LAiC's central urban location – if not its somewhat austere urban form – acted as a draw to its members in other ways too. This was not a motivation to join LAiC as such, but the urban aspect was not just a magnet for younger relatives of the group. It was notable how prominent a factor urban location was when members discussed their motivations, often confounding stereotypical assumptions that as we grow older we might increasingly seek a quiet life, or a rural idyll (and as noted in Chapter 2). Several members made the decision to move from relatively rural or 'small town' locations to Berlin following retirement. '*I just thought it would be exciting!*' is how Janet summed up her attraction to Berlin. And while views on other matters were often difficult to draw out, the advantages of the *urban* in later life – the cultural opportunities, the opportunity to socialise and connect, to be involved in politics and so on – was something virtually every member talked about more freely, both in interviews but also when we were out and about as a group. Rosie for instance described how she had:

... lived in the countryside before here, but I thought "I do *not* want to grow old in a village!" I've known loads of people that lived in the city, and now say "now that I'm old, I want to have the city nearby, but I want more peace and quiet, and I love being in nature". But that doesn't go for me. I want to have both. But if I must choose, I really want to have the city.

As previously described, LAiC's very urban location in an existing 1970s concrete-built social housing estate in what is still a very poor, first, second and third generation immigrant area was the primary reason the group was so depleted at the point it moved in. But it is striking that while most members admitted to being ambivalent at the time, they now feel very differently, both about the area and urban living in general. For Judith:

⁹ A German city near Cologne on the western border, which the interviewee seemed to use as shorthand for 'backwater'.

... no, Neukölln didn't put me off in the end: we used to live in Steglitz, and I found it boring there. *Zehlendorf*¹⁰ ... [expressed with distaste] I thought, when I grow old, I want to be somewhere that's walkable, somewhere that's ... got some life.

And equally for Roger:

For me, living here is simply colourful and interesting. I don't want to live in Zehlendorf or Dahlem – that's all so boring and dead. [interviewer laughs] I like this colourfulness and lots of people. We also have good contact with the non-German inhabitants¹¹ in the rest of the block. It's simply the whole life here: two subways, two buses at the door, theatre, cinema, parks [... he lists several nearby ...] You can't live more beautifully! Or better!

The only exception to this was the case of the male LAiC member (noted above) who had left after a relatively short period to join a (subsequently unsuccessful) cohousing group in the countryside. Someone told me how, after living in Berlin for more than 30 years, *'everything got on his nerves now'*, and that he felt uncomfortable in LAiC's ethnically diverse neighbourhood. Amanda makes a subtler point perhaps about urban location, that a group like LAiC – an intentional community but with separate apartments, physically integrated into the existing neighbourhood – offered something that was *substantively* different from equivalent communities in rural settings:

[speaking English] I had thought about going to a land commune, and had looked at various projects, for example one that's [...] everyone together in a former village of multiple houses. Yeah really, I thought I could live like that communally, in an artists' community in the countryside. But that was too restricted, and I needed contact with people, more people... and by public transport. I don't want

¹⁰ Steglitz and Zehlendorf are adjoining West Berlin suburbs, middle class and wealthy, but far from the bustle and nightlife associated with 'Berlin as European destination city'. Neukölln by contrast is a densely populated, poor but fast-gentrifying central borough, especially around LAiC's estate neighbourhood, where bars and restaurants have begun to proliferate in recent years.

¹¹ It is widely socially accepted in Berlin for ethnically white Germans to refer to those who may have parents or even grandparents from other countries such as Turkey as 'non-German' or Turkish even if likely born in Berlin; undoubtedly related to this is the fact that being born in Germany (unlike in the UK) does not infer citizenship.

a car. But I need to live somewhere where I can sometimes be alone... no...
[English-German discussion with me, to find correct word] ... *anonymous*, and
that's difficult in the countryside, that doesn't work.

Aside from touching on the important point of access to public transport (many in the group do not drive) Amanda's comment hints at the importance for her that LAiC represents the advantages of two worlds: the anonymity of the city and the advantages of a small community. Further, several members described how they would not want to live in Berlin, or would have come to Berlin, to live alone. For them, the existence of LAiC made it *possible* to live in the city.

The appeal of community

For one or two members, seeking a community like LAiC was regarded as something that fitted with a particular later life stage. Roger, in telling me about his and John's housing history, explained how they had lived in many locations over the years, and although they had a tendency to keep an open house to visitors, they had not previously been interested in collaborative housing as such:

We lived in [city in southern Germany], in a former yacht house with eight rooms in the middle of the forest and had a full house every weekend. We did group activities, the family [came to visit] and during the holidays we always had the children. We always basically lived as just the two of us, always together since early when we met. We had two children live with us for two years – a mentally disabled boy and a disabled girl, but that was basically nursing, those children. [Prior to this] When the Wall fell, John got an undeveloped piece of land from his mother, in [East German town near Berlin], John was born in the area. At the time we were living elsewhere, but we liked to do something new every few years. So we moved there, we built an ecohouse there, felt very comfortable there. I was also active in politics in the council, we were active in the church community... we felt comfortable there.

But being happy to live in a single family house when given a real choice was the exception among the group members. For all but one other in the group, some form of communal or

collaborative living was either a part of their housing history, had been the goal of searches over many years, or hinted at as an unhappiness with isolated lives, a yearning for something more sociable. While Wendy was the only member who had lived for all of her adult life in a commune (having raised a family in a rural commune in southern Germany), Tina's story was typical, in choosing to emphasize the communal aspects of her biography even though this was perhaps unrepresentative of significant periods of her life:

I come from a simple working-class family, so this concept was familiar to me. I have five brothers and sisters, so I've always lived with a few people and it was just more fun to live in a community. [laughs] All my life I've been trying to get to know other people. I didn't go to college, but I lived in [southern Germany] for a long time in a residential community with a lot of students. It was always very important to me to have this environment. I just thought [when first hearing about LAiC], "Ah yes, back to my roots!"

Several in the group had been members of other groups at various planning stages, often for several years, or had lived briefly in other groups (like Rosie, noted earlier) as an experiment. Janet was close to another group on the outskirts of Berlin that after several emotional years had not managed to complete the project and move in (and still has not, to date), a process she describes as so emotionally stressful that she decided she would never participate in another group; LAiC for her came 'readymade' however. Jill retains close contact with a successful cohousing group in her home town on the western side of Germany, but the location was problematic for her. Judith and Clive had been intending to live in a large and very prominent new-build co-operative project in Berlin, but the project had stalled financially while under construction; they claim that in retrospect they prefer the small-scale 'charm' of living as part of LAiC.

A frequent touch point for many members (and also for several in Group Two) was the *Beginenhof*, a recent large-scale cohousing development in Berlin (around 40 households) exclusively open to women, although not restricted to a particular age group. More than one person had expressed an interest in moving there prior to their current group, but had not been able to meet the financial requirements of its ownership-based model. But as with Tina's description above, some members also made frequent reference to their student days or much

earlier 'halcyon' periods of their lives when talking about motivations for joining LAiC. Alison, despite having lived with her husband in a single family home for much of her life and never expressing regret of that aspect of her life directly, described how she had:

... never lived in a housing community [Wohngemeinschaft] before but in my first job I was a nursing sister, as a trainee sister, and we obviously lived together in a single house. I shared a room with a girlfriend, with all of us living on the same floor. So not exactly a housing community, but I always wanted to do that, it was always a dream anyway, until now.

And on another occasion:

I've always liked being with other people. The Church was a lot to do with it, but before that, from the beginning... and I still like the need for 'group therapy'. A group is always a very lively creature. It's so much richer [a life] than just being a couple getting old together, which always feels so cramped, so claustrophobic.

On occasion members would describe a motivation for joining LAiC (or seeking a group like it) that went beyond a general preference for community life, to hint at something they felt had been more specifically missing in their lives. Beth expressed quite high expectations:

I spoke to no-one all day long. I had friends, but they were all 20, 30 km away. While I was still there, I already knew I had this need... "I want to be in a community, I *must* have that". I don't want to have a relationship with one person, because our separation was so painful for us, but nonetheless I want a group as a replacement partner.

This was an unusually unambiguous statement, and it would be wrong to depict the single members of LAiC or of other groups that I had contact with as seeking an ersatz partner or family grouping that they had not otherwise been able to achieve. While Wendy recalls how she had '*... always had a partner and always lived in community. Then suddenly, I was living alone in a flat in Berlin, without either*', what was notable was that community was implicitly her preference, and more so for those who had been single for a significant time prior to LAiC and lived very independent lives, and had no wish to find a new partner as a later life choice.

Obviously for those with partners, who join as couples, motivations might be quite different. I experienced difficulty here in that there were simply fewer couples. For Judith and Clive (as will be noted later), it was clear that there was a long-held interest in collaborative housing that predated their thinking about planning for later life; it was also clear in Group Two that the couples (whose numbers dominated the group) seemed to expect much less in terms of the community than the two single women in the group, whose expectations of a place to age together had been clearer and for whom their project has clearly been a disappointment (and which is returned to in the next chapter).

The role of gender

This attraction to community seems to reflect gender (for LAiC's generation at least) as much as it does a specific life phase. Single older men seeking cohousing groups remain a rarity; in fact, I did not encounter any *single* older men (or indeed many younger ones) during the whole of my fieldwork period across the three groups (or others in formation), with the exception of a single man who joined LAiC at an early stage after moving in and left around two years later (and which will be discussed in Chapter 6). Pauline represents the general feeling in LAiC, albeit expressing it more bluntly than some, when she says:

Old men always find a new partner. It's funny, but... There are enough older women who like to help older men [laughs]: ironing, washing ... Older men do not need as much community living as older women, because they usually find a partner. If they are a widower they soon find a woman again. But the women do not. Because the women are too old for the older men... Women of the same age are too old for same-aged men [we both laugh]. Yeah, you've got to laugh, but it's true!

This also closely relates to the feeling among the – admittedly female dominated – group, that men are less socially skilled, adaptive or flexible in ways that might make them better able to engage with ideas such as collaborative living. Janet echoes comments by others about male relatives or ex-partners, in this case her more conservative brother:

He married very early, he lives in [the suburbs] and is quite satisfied. He was very sceptical of the whole [LAIc] idea, in the beginning anyway. The idea of moving into a group doesn't fit with him at all. He thinks his sister is a bit crazy. He came to one of our early meetings and found the women *very* self-confident, which he did not like.

I had a strong sense that such attitudes were generational: the women perceived a distinct generational difference. When talking about their own children and grandchildren for instance, several noted how their sons or son-in-laws took quite different, more equitable roles in their relationships and parenting, and also in the 'emotional work' of maintaining the social sphere in general. Similarly from my own point of view, while one or two of the women clearly felt uncomfortable talking to me in depth about their emotional lives, most seemed happy to talk freely in a way that some – Beth for instance – complained would often not be possible with men of her own generation, in part because of social discomfort, but also because (in Beth's case) that *'they have no interest in listening anyway.'*

This thesis does not attempt to study the role or status of gender in senior cohousing groups, but I hope that I have acknowledged throughout that it is present to varying degrees in all the social dimensions of senior cohousing, despite the fact that it has thus far been little recognised in the literature. Thus the theme is returned to more than once in later chapters, within the context of my grounded approach, and how it relates to the social observations that I made throughout my study of LAiC and the other groups.

The attraction to a specifically older group – an ‘older’ identity?

A rejection of inter-generational groups

Thus far a range of themes has been explored that link members’ decision-making *indirectly* to age – entering a life stage where a person either finds themselves socially isolated, or fears that they might be in the future – and at other times not really related to ageing at all, e.g. an attraction to community living more generally. Yet LAiC from the beginning had been quite specific in its intentions around ageing together and being an older group. This section explores how individuals responded to that in making their decisions, examining how such motivations may not be as straightforward as might be imagined. Our own ageing is, among other things, a complex social construction, and consideration is given here to how motivations to join LAiC might also reflect something supportive of a third age activity, and even an elision of some of the manifesto’s ambitions toward the fourth.

The first LAiC members recall being quite open in their acknowledgement of themselves as growing older, reflected in the fact that the project was quite clearly advertised and conceived specifically around age and designed to attract an older membership, who had a willingness to make decisions relating to the last part of their lives in a way which they had always felt was different from others they knew. As is often the case in talking to senior cohousing groups, I am continually surprised by the openness to ageing that must have been in the minds of these same people when they were around my own age, when I find it difficult to be so forward-thinking about my own life. Jill for instance recalled how the title of the original advertisement for members – ‘Growing Old in Community’ – was what caught her eye:

I had seen their advert, and also read the [preceding] article about the housing project in Dresden, where old people got together in this way. I thought, “That’s awesome, I’m planning to move to Berlin anyway, and there’s a group there – it doesn’t get any better than that!”

Those who joined the group later were also unequivocal about how being in an older in a group was an attraction. Rosie, for instance, who joined about five years ago, seemed typical in describing how:

Rosie: For years I wanted to find myself a community to be in, to live in old age.

Me: And it was always... definitely *to be old*?

Rosie: Yes, exactly that, a community that functioned in that way [as cohousing]. I had looked for a long time, since my 50s really.

These initial responses from members might be considered obvious. As members, they had clearly not been put off by a project that was so specifically promoted as being for and by older people. Yet I had found elsewhere that for members who join a group in later life, that choices are often greatly limited by the possibilities available. Early in my research I met a number of other groups in Berlin at various stages of development, including one for which I attended a monthly planning meeting of around forty people who I guessed to be from their late 50s upwards. When I asked some of these members why they had chosen an older group, there was surprise: they were *not* an older group, they retorted. It was simply that these were the only people who had the time and the interest. Similarly, the cohousing group whose project was under construction in LAiC's neighbourhood during my field work had not intended to be a senior group, and although it did include a family of three generations, a large majority were retired.

I later realised that I had misunderstood Rosie's comment noted above: she had actually been looking for a community in which she *personally* could be older. This became clearer when she spoke about her actual experience of another group, which she tried out only for a month or so:

To begin with, I was absolutely *not* looking for a senior community. I'd started looking, oh, twenty years before [joining LAiC], for a community where I could live, really, *into* old age. What I mean is, that the older ones should be supported a bit by the younger ones when they get really old. But also some give and take,

a balance. And the old people would be able to take some strain off the parents, and build relationships with the kids. [...] But the actual group was a bit of a disaster. They weren't flexible enough with each other! And above all it was the old people who were the problem! They dictated the terms! So the hostility grew quickly. The young women – young people are just a bit more relaxed – the garden was not kept tidy. Kids are loud – they want to play. And the older people wanted to have their peace and quiet. That's how it started! It didn't work either way, for the younger ones or the older. So I thought: "No! This is not for me!"

In fact, the whole group shared the view that older people and younger people had differing interests that were hard to reconcile. For some, like Clive, it was a gradual recognition that older people might be rejected, or worse simply taken for granted, by those of other ages who were still immersed in lives of raising families and work:

We'd looked at groups, possibilities before [the most recent project that fell through]. The last one was a Baugruppe. But apart from [the two of] us, these were actually only working people. I feared that we would be the ones who are always accepting parcels [laughs]. That all the other residents would have a completely separate life to us, and we'd never see them, we'd just accept the packages.

Interestingly, members of Group Two, although fiercely resistant to the idea of being defined as an 'older' group, also echoed this view, with at least one commenting that they'd favoured joining that group rather than the cross-generational group with young families in the block next door, as they felt theirs to be a place that was 'calmer'. Certainly the LAiC founders, in Roger's recollection at least, had explicitly rejected a more inter-generational group from the start, even though this was not emphasized in the manifesto:

It just doesn't work! In those lovely stories it's always: if young and old live together, then the older ones can take care of the children and the younger ones can do something else. And there are so many ideas about parenting and so on, you get into trouble if you criticise. It just doesn't work!'

This specific point about clashes with parents over attitudes to child-rearing was mentioned by others, but Roger's perception that an unfair childcare burden would be placed on the older ones in the group that was the overriding view. Although Amanda is one of those in the group without her own grandchildren, she is not untypical in how she was put off when thinking about cohousing:

... so I'm not against [young] children. But I also went to an event, a mixed group, where some people said that many young people joined this group because they want '*grandmothers*' [says the word as if in quotation] who can take care of their children. And that would *not* be my thing! To be reduced to a single function like that?! [laughs] [...] But then LAiC came along next anyway.

As an aside to this theme, and something that surprised me when I first heard it late on in the fieldwork, was that early in the group's life there had been discussions over whether a young woman and her daughter could join the group. It came to nothing as the woman withdrew (she was dissatisfied with the local schools) but in fact the tale seems to be an exception that proves the rule: LAiC had thought this might work with the rest of the group as a kind of 'collaborative grandparent' rather than a genuinely inter-generational group. The incident oddly echoes the difficult negotiation that some in the group (including Amanda, who does not have children) are experiencing with the recent arrival of grandchildren, and is discussed in some depth in Chapter 7.

Thus far the decision to join a specifically older group has been framed as a rejection of sharing with young families with children on largely practical grounds. But Amanda's comment also hints at something more deeply connected to identity, that choosing an older group might also avoid being placed in the *role* of grandparent as a social stereotype which she regards as a mono-dimensional identity that does not necessarily fit with how the members see themselves. Membership of an older group might therefore, for Amanda at least, represent a freedom from age prejudice projected on to traditional roles in this way.

A shared generational culture, or a third age?

In fact there is evidence of an attraction by several members of the group distinctly to a shared culture that is age-related, if not always clearly expressed as a connection through a specific generational culture. Some aspects of this have played out in terms of the group's social dynamic and changing identity, and are thus dealt with in later chapters. It is worth noting however at this point that for some in the group such an identification played a part in deciding to join the group in the first place. As Wendy described it:

... and – this was the main reason – because it was also people who were all as old as me. I only had friends [back home] who were ten or fifteen years younger. Except my husband, who was the same age. But otherwise I always had the feeling, if something was current or up-to-date... or the other way, if it had something to do with being my age, they didn't understand that at all. I felt that I could not talk about much at all. The day I came to meet [LAIc], suddenly here were people who were born at the same time – who were also born in the war. It was like coming home. That was a great feeling.

I had assumed that if individuals had been attracted to joining an older group in the hope of shared identity around age, it would be strongly generational. Much is shared by the group in these terms; all of the group identifies as West German (although the original group prior to moving in included several members from the former GDR), and the 28 years of formal division by the Wall into two nations is naturally a central backdrop to the lives of Germans of this age, born during or just after the War. Germany has no baby boomer generation as such, but a stronger identification by *some* of the group is that of the '68er' – that part of the population that came of age in the late 1960s but that was also very politically active, hence does not apply to the whole cohort.

Yet this was not an especially strong shared theme in bringing the group members together, and several of the group rejected the term as applying to them. There was a broadly shared sympathy within the group with various socially progressive causes and left-of-centre politics: two members remain heavily involved politically (one in local party politics, the other in more activist-based activities) and several of the group went on at least one protest together in

central Berlin during my fieldwork. But this was by no means universal, and was never mentioned as a motivation to joining the group. In fact being rooted in the 68er student living culture was far more notable for Group One, who, as well as identifying more strongly as 68ers (noted above), are also mainly a close-knit group of lifelong friends that had first met through a network of such housing arrangements, and were part of a larger social network that has its origins in a group of students who both studied under, and lived with, the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas in in the late 1960s. Some LAiC members certainly did regard themselves in that light, especially in the context of housing, with ideas that were always ‘in the air’ for many members, whatever their personal experience. As Pauline put it:

I think for my generation it's just a familiar thing. Communal housing, student co-living. 1968... it's known for... it's significant for the student revolt. Sociology students made communes. There was a tradition of... 68ers – me included – who often lived in communal housing.

For LAiC, what was more notable was a loose set of ideas or attitudes that members often used to frame their decision to join the group. These often centred on how individuals thought of themselves (and by implication other members of the group) as having the necessary mental aptitude to join a senior cohousing group, to organise themselves to make such a move. Rosie for instance talked to me about the concept of ‘Überschaubarkeit’ in the context of ageing, a word that literally means ‘straightforwardness’ but here has the sense perhaps of ‘managing one’s life through simplicity’:

Older people want things to be in place, manageable [überschaubarer] ... it means “to have things in mind”. I’ve always heard that a lot, working a lot with older people over the years. I’ve heard it more and more, Überschaubarkeit, I lose track. So, in old age everything reduces down, and for me too... and I notice, how it’s applying to me, the Überschaubarkeit [indicates around her studio apartment]. Bedroom, I just need it for sleeping. Living room? Much too big, I thought that I don’t need it any more. It’s enough for me [here]. So, a choice to be made, what’s still important, and what’s not. And now I’m here. And so I had felt that way, and I cleared out much [of my life].

I suspected that this view was to some extent a justification of her own circumstances – she has one of the smaller bedsit-type apartments in the group, whereas some are considerably larger – but nonetheless it was a term with which others in the group agreed. Granted also that she presented this as applying to *all* older people. But when I raised this in conversation with her and Beth on a group day out a few weeks later, she admitted that this was not the case; in fact they talked about a potential group member who had come along that day (who some of the group knew already, and that I had separately visited) as being an example of somebody failing to follow the tenets of *Überschaubarkeit*. She lived alone in a large, three-bedroomed apartment admitted that she really had no plans for how to deal with the vast collection of art books that filled nearly every room, despite her membership of a project under construction in which she aimed to take a much smaller, one bedroomed apartment.

Many of the members expressed a slight disdain for what several people referred to as ‘floating voters’: people they have met who expressed an interest in LAiC and/or are members of other groups in formation, who, as one LAiC was typical in seeing it: *‘...enjoy the idea of the group, but can never quite give up their nice apartments. They love the social round that comes with planning the group, but they just can’t... they won’t commit.’* Beth also noted a slightly different perspective, how in her opinion a desire to join a group requires more than a positive predisposition, but a kind of flexible attitude:

The decision alone to join a group asks for some mental ability! Not everybody is able to do that. I don't want to say that we are better than others. Maybe we feel better. But my friends – I’ve had four female friends here in Berlin for 30, 40 years – they are like me. There is no difference! They are active, they are always out and about... there’s no difference! But I think you have to have a certain flexibility [of mind] to want to join such a group. Not everybody has that. And not everybody wants it.

On one hand she presents this as merely a kind of ‘communal-living gene’, that is morally neutral in other regards. But she spoke again about this when on the same trip noted above, and later, when I followed up with her, she set such flexibility in contrast to those ‘others’ who, she implied, had failed to seize the third age imperative:

[speaking in English] ... yes, some of them [LAIc members] left their flats in other cities and came here! At this age, that's really some flexibility - which lots of people don't have. Lots of people have to wait until... They insist on [staying in] their own home, because they are used to their old home since 50 years... Every change is... – eine Drohung? Threat? ...threatening to them. So they wait until they cannot change any more! And then they have to go to the Altersheim [old people's home]. They *have* to, they have no choice!

Several members noted how their existing homes were simply unsuitable, usually the primary problem of being several floors up without a lift. Often though, the most interesting responses were when out as a group or sometimes chatting at the weekly lunch at the local neighbourhood centre, where the 'others' of which they spoke were often around. These others, occasionally described by LAiC members as 'old people', had failed to downsize, to take stock of their physical possessions and by inference, it seemed, their lives: something that placed LAiC members in the category of 'serious' thinking about managing the next, different, phase of their lives, of maintaining control.

The flexibility needed to join a group was also sometimes referenced in a rejection of their own parents' attitudes. Unlike my study of two groups in the UK, some of whose members strongly criticised specific 'bad choices' made by their parents (Hudson, 2017), those in LAiC seemed in a sense to go further, surprised at my suggestion that the attitudes of the two generations might be comparable. As Wendy commented:

Of course we didn't all even stay in touch with our parents. I can't imagine they would have even thought about it [living collaboratively in later life]. They were so... well, it was another time, different kinds of people. Let me think... [long pause]. I think that everyone then, when my parents were older – this was well after the war, obviously – but it was that generation. They just wanted to forget everything and... hide out, to consume! To have their little house, and their neighbours yes... but, to be private. My life to them, living how I did, it was a travesty!

I suspected for some in the group – particularly those of the 68er generation – talking about their parents' attitudes opened up a far bigger cultural-political divide than it might do in the

UK, for obvious reasons given Germany's 20th century history. In retrospect though, I might have been oversensitive in approaching the issue of members' parents. In one of my rare interviews with a member of Group One, the subject came up without me directly asking, as one woman there explained:

I think in old age, this is a fantastic project to get yourself into – early, while you're still fit. You have to start early enough. Not right now for you, maybe, but start thinking who of the friends you'd want to do that with, who also feels like the age you are. For me, it was all about the children. That they don't have to take care of you later on, or that you end up in a care home [Pflegeheim]. Care homes are a nightmare, because they're so impersonal!¹² With my own mother it was awful, she... well she never thought about it, about how things would work after my father died. She was so far away, from everyone really. And she couldn't drive. That was *sooo* much of my life, and I just thought no! So eventually she was just in a nursing home, and that was that [laughs].

On one hand this all reflects an attitude of thinking ahead, a straightforwardness that does indeed set the group members apart from others in their willingness to think about issues that many of us might avoid. But it could also be perceived simultaneously as both of these – as a particular third age construction, that desiring such an organised state in post-retirement as a way of maintaining control over issues for which eventually there will be no control. I say this, because what was notable in talking with members about their motivations was the absence of any real reference to issues of the fourth age, which were rarely if ever acknowledged. Even when I used the flyer as a point of reference, there were few responses that acknowledged the fourth age issues of health and mutual support related to it. Often, individuals talked briefly in vague terms or seemed to move sideways from the subject. Judith for instance, hinted at how she and her husband had seen senior cohousing as a way perhaps of maintaining agency in later life through membership of a community, but moved towards the more general:

We had always thought about age and getting older. That before we got really old, to be in an environment, or to seek an environment where we're the same. It doesn't have to be the same age, but to have a lot of contact around us with

¹² In literal translation she uses the term 'they are mass processors', meant in the sense of factories.

those of similar age. And not in the style of a Verein¹³. And this communal-thinking, community-living [Wohngemeinschaft] thing... it's like, with the community school. My children were both at the same community school. It was run by the parents, so you got pretty involved, selecting the teachers and so on... and that's the same for old age, it's always struck me that way.

Occasionally, someone would more obviously avoid the question; when I asked Tina what she felt about LAiC's aims around mutual support, albeit in a different context to that of 'motivations', she said something revealing, that:

[the flyer] was written by Roger and John, Alison too probably [the three surviving founder members]. They wrote that right at the beginning. I didn't join via the flyer though, I came later.

While Roger complained that parts of the flyer text had been removed in response to later arrivals, most notably the statement that '*Through mutual assistance, care and nursing costs are saved*', he seemed now as reticent as the rest of the group in referencing such issues in the context of a motivation. The only notable exception was Pauline. She was alone in having lived in the Dresden group that had inspired LAiC to form, but where in fact there was a greater range of ages, with a number of younger disabled members. Although Pauline's primary motivation for moving to Berlin (she only joined LAiC later) was to be close to her daughter, she talked in detail about how her previous group had planned to a much greater extent for potential future disability for instance. She seemed to have expected something similar at LAiC, commenting that others others had not been motivated by planning for a fourth age in the way she felt they should, claiming that the choice of the name *Living Alone in Community* was a deliberate avoidance of Dresden's *Growing Old in Community*. While this seems unlikely in itself – as the manifesto created around the same time is quite explicit on the issue – it nonetheless reflects her underlying view that addressing the potential negative aspects of later life that were a motivation for her were much less so for others.

¹³ A German association or club, which has a more formal legal basis than in the UK.

In fairness, Roger separately noted that the name sought to reflect the separation of apartments in cohousing, and it is clear from the rest of the flyer text that ageing and care were a major part of the group's thinking, not least the slogan of '*Not alone and not in a home!*'. Yet the general obfuscation around the subject now, in favour of an emphasis on being a unique group of successful agers, hints at the difficulties and contradictions in setting out to join or form a group with such issues in mind become they become apparent. How the group thinks currently feels about future planning in this direction is returned to in greater depth in Chapter 8.

5.6 Summary and discussion

This chapter has examined both the genesis of LAiC as a cohousing group, and how the current members' recall being drawn to it, in the context of a project that eventually took a very different form from that originally intended. The original plan – for a small, focussed group of people to acquire a site and create a housing project from scratch – reflects much more closely the model for cohousing and especially for senior cohousing related in the latter part of Chapter 2. LAiC were forced down the highly unusual (if not unique) route of moving into an existing housing block, as the only way to avoid the group disbanding altogether.

Although not the central focus of this study, the negotiation of this compromise is the aspect of the group's history where the concept of social and other forms of capital is the most relevant, specifically Bourdieu's concept of forms of capital as representative of resources available to individuals; that our resources used in achieving our goals extend beyond purely economic to cultures around class, education, social standing, networks and developed interpersonal skills. If making senior cohousing can be argued as representing an application of economic capital to create a proximate community of strong supportive social bonds in later life, then LAiC's lack of *economic* capital has forced difficult compromises (whose weaknesses both in spatial and tenure terms will be returned to in later chapters). Yet in contrast particularly with Group One, whose project was entirely brought about through a geographical transfer of capital from elsewhere, it is clear that the original LAiC group drew to some extent on local connections and knowledge, but also benefitted from 'cultural capital' – from the 'respectability' of a shared professional class and age group – in responding to the local housing

authority's apparent need to create a greater socio-economic mix on the estate, albeit while also acknowledging the role of significant serendipity. Perhaps more importantly, the composition of the *current* LAiC group suggests that this outcome also had the effect of making it open to a wider range of people, specifically those not able to develop a self-funded cohousing project, and willing to try a different model.

Beyond the personal resources and life circumstance opportunity that made LAiC a possibility for individual members, the chapter has focussed on motivations and the perceived needs of those members in joining – albeit for many the thinking process is clouded by subsequent years and changing relationships with the group as it now exists. For most of the group, it is fair to say that some form of intentional community was a long-standing attraction for nearly all the members, even if a majority had limited experience of such communities, often restricted by other life commitments. Members were keen to present themselves as having been motivated by a 'sensible' and practical approach to later life; of downsizing and simplifying their lives, but also as a way of living that several saw as incompatible with younger, family-orientated groups. Others presented geographical isolation as a motivation in a similar vein, as well as the access to services and opportunities associated with living in an urban location; practical responses to issues they saw as likely to affect them in later life, on one hand as a way to avoid isolation, on the other as an attraction to proximate friendship, to having good neighbours.

Despite such an evident 'practical' approach to planning for later life, there was a notable absence when I discussed motivations, of directly addressing issues of late-life decline, of the fourth age. Again, this is perhaps unsurprising given that many had made their commitment many years ago, and discussions may reflect more a suppression of concerns or fears in the present, a potential negotiation which is returned to in later chapters. And this is not to suggest that members of the group overtly act out a 'denial' of ageing. Indeed, the individual members always seemed to me relatively grounded and thoughtful on the issue, with little evidence of the third age consumer culture portrayed in much of the writing on the phenomenon related in Chapter 2 – of a new generation of consumers self-consciously intent on creating a young-old culture in the face of ageing.

In fact, the attraction most strongly expressed by members was the appeal of a group of similar age, a shared empathy for the experience of being older, and (to a lesser extent) a generational culture in common. Yet while there is a clear identification with each other as a group of older people, in discussing motivations, members hinted that they thought of themselves as a *different kind* of older people. Almost by definition the group represents those who are particularly outgoing and willing to organise themselves in support of a community. But several openly felt that a certain ‘mental agility’ was needed to be able to consider such a group, as something that was more than being simply active and sociable. The group members signalled strongly that they regarded themselves as different from ‘other older people’ in this sense, but also that this was part of an identity as a group. On one hand they set themselves apart from their parents’ generation, but more notably from others of their own age – those who implicitly are not as capable or sensible in their choices. In some ways an attraction to the urban location fits with this self-image: yes, there are practical advantages in terms of public transport and amenities, but among all three groups there was also an attraction to the idea of exciting urban lives, in a location that brings members’ families to *them*. For LAiC members it was often more complex than this, a negotiation of different practical needs. But it remains an idea that confounds the stereotype of retiring to ‘somewhere quiet’, to be visited occasionally by family whose busy lives are focussed elsewhere.0

Thus while choosing such a project on one hand represents a practical response around many of the challenges of later life, it also represented for many in the group a strong statement of self-identity and opportunity. In turn this is reflective of an idea that underpins senior cohousing, that such projects are a declaration of independence, a need to ‘do it for themselves’. How the practicalities of aiming for that independence – so extensively set out in the group’s manifesto – unfold in practice, will be explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 6: The interior life of LAiC: social dynamics *within* the group

“Almost exactly ten years ago, we moved in. In autumn we were all here, all six of us. The year that then followed, in my memory became a very special year. We were all so happy that it had finally worked! We were on a bit high with that feeling of Yes! LAiC really exists! We’re really here now!”

Alison

6.1 Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, the LAiC group that actually moved in to its new estate location was a small, dedicated group of like-minded individuals, excited by the final fruition of their long-awaited dream. This chapter is about how this panned out in terms of the dynamics *within* the group, focussing initially on the rapidly changing social dynamics of the group’s early days, before exploring in greater depth how the group lives now, over a decade later. LAiC’s negotiation of similar themes of identity *beyond* the group – through broader social connections such as close family for instance – is dealt with in Chapter 7. The themes that emerged during the data collection are set against some of the original aims of the group as set out in their own flyer as a point of reference, but also considered within the deeper context of ageing and identity.

The founding of the group ‘on Christian ideals’ but open to different ideas is taken as a cue for the first section, which examines the beginnings of LAiC as a small, homogenous group that quickly expanded into something more diverse. The second section similarly takes the group’s original intention – to be a community of ‘more than good neighbours’ through formal and informal social activity – to explore what this actually means in practice: whether such closeness is either desired or practical, and what this might tell us about reciprocal with others. The chapter moves on to consider how different concepts of ageing identity are expressed or negotiated through group membership, and how the aim of ‘being an older group’ may not be as straightforward as perhaps envisaged. The group dynamic is further investigated in terms of

what it means to be single or a couple within such a group, especially in later years. Finally, the chapter considers the social dynamic implications of LAiC's compromise of living in an existing block, as against the more 'typical' purpose-built arrangement.

6.2 Early days: from homogeneity to conflict, to resolution

It is clear from Alison's quote at the beginning of this chapter that the group that finally moved in to its new home were excited about their new creation and were initially on somewhat of a high, described by more than one of the founder members as euphoric. In part this was because they had climbed a mountain to reach where they were, and had succeeded in creating something that was certainly the first of its kind in Berlin at least. Despite the underlying aim of living together and supporting each other into old age, this was a time when the group members were largely retired but still firmly in their sixties; the sense given when hearing about this period now is of newness, the excitement of new possibilities and a new life. As Alison continues:

We were very excited with everything, us six! For example, we used to sing for hours together! I think the songbooks are still down there [in the common flat]. We'd found out that we were nearly all in the scouts, and we sang the old Scout songs for hours, and were just thrilled! Of course, it's clear that this is a time that passes.

It was clear there was also a homogeneity to this small group, a sense of shared purpose. Jill recalls how:

We had developed these things for four years up till then, and it was completely our idea: now the child was born. We'd done a lot of workshops about group dynamics on weekends and on vacations, so we had it clear: what's important to us? What kind of a group do we want to be? And we also had something like an ideology of living together, with the Augustine text, you know that too. Once we signed [the contracts with the estate management] in September, we did two months, I think, just of group dynamics, being together. That was a very intense group feeling.

Within a year, the first new member had arrived who had not been involved in the group's formative period prior to moving in. It is useful at this stage to briefly summarise LAiC's membership history as follows, with my fieldwork year, 2017, being year eleven:

Year	Member total	Names
1	6	The founder members move in together: Roger & John, Alison and her husband, Jill, and Jean
1 to 3	11	Janet, Wendy, Amanda, Tina and Pauline join. One other member (male) joined early in this period but then left within two years.
5	13	Rosie and Beth both join together.
8 / 9	11	Alison's husband passes away. Jean leaves the group.
10	13	Clive and Judith join the group (as a couple)

Table 2. LAiC history: year of joining for each member.

It is inevitable that any small homogenous group will experience a change in its social dynamic as new members arrive. But all the current members – both founders and those who came later – agree that the first few years of the group were marred by significant conflicts, which began very quickly with the arrival of the first new members, and at some points seemed to even threaten the group's survival. At first, this was related to me as being largely around religious difference. But I wondered whether the 'shared goals' set out in the original manifesto, written jointly by such a tight-knit, homogenous group, were too tightly framed, too ambitious for a potential future with a larger, more diverse group. The document's wording, '*Predominantly Christian...*' but '*...open to people with different ways of life and world views*' hints at this being predicted, or at least recognised as making the group too exclusive. But in practice, there were challenges ahead. Jill recalls how:

... everyone who had come here, all were from the social area [field] and all were ... religious... in some way. But not church religious, necessarily. But they came

from life where one was influenced by church. And then came the first, I would say, atheistic people, and [they] found that impossible! Above all, from their point of view, what we had with our Christian ideals and imprinted on us, they kept going on at us, saying, “they are nice words, but none of that is true”.

Yet as the fieldwork progressed, it became that this apparent ‘religious schism’ was not quite the root of the disagreements, or rather religious belief was simply one outlet for tensions within the group. Firstly, an assumption that the founder members were an overtly religious group is misleading; although (as described in the last chapter) they did connect through a religious magazine, they were by no means ‘fundamentalist’, and could be seen as more of an intellectual movement, bringing together, as one member described it, the common threads from Lutherism and Catholicism for an open discussion. The male couple in the group are committed – if somewhat outspoken – Catholics, and remain heavily involved in their church. And although the manifesto continues to include a passage by Saint Augustine, it is there because of its focus on the enjoyment of community; the document has never made overt reference to religious belief or practice; the principles set out are not specifically religious ones.

And while the ‘newcomers’ did indeed hold a range of personal views including at least one who was strongly atheist, what gradually emerged was a different picture: in some degree one of false expectations of how much an expanding group could share their lives in practice. But to a much greater degree, the tensions arose from who were perceived to hold real power in the group; an ‘elite’ core of founder members who had made the group over several years, versus those who they saw as pretenders. Amanda, who joined the group in its second year, remembers that:

The new ones, including me, wanted to discuss things, talk about certain rules that existed. But that was very, very difficult! ... Maybe things were said wrongly [on both sides] but one of the original members said “We don’t want to smash our best chinaware¹⁴. We say how it is, and it stays that way!” We felt it was a kind of prohibition, even though part of the manifesto was to share beautiful expression and different ideas.

¹⁴ German expression, comparable to ‘not throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

Another member felt able to explain the situation to me more bluntly:

So you want to know what's going on at the chicken farm, that's it?¹⁵

[I make an affirmative noise, but am confused by the term]

This group is difficult... there are alpha-members¹⁶ the founders of the group, the so-called core group. They have built it up together. They argue, but they have built it together. They know each other very well. Roger is godfather [Pater] – how do you say that in English... Godfather! He's like the godfather to [female member], and she was there at the beginning. And Jean, who left for her sister. That was hard, because they have very different connections – family almost! If you came later, it's harder.

If this was a power struggle, it was not entirely one-sided. Alison ruefully describes how the singing (and the sense of close camaraderie that came with it) quickly stopped, how the new members 'made a face' every time it was suggested. The newcomers objected to the décor, furniture and pictures chosen for the shared apartment space, dismissing them as (in Alison's words) *'good enough until we find something better'*; several founder members commented in one-on-one interviews on the somewhat sterile look of the apartment now, which they see as in part a result of their agreeing to changes. Further, within the first couple of years a series of amendments to the manifesto had begun, which according to Roger led to it becoming *'shorter and shorter. Each of the new people arrived and said "Oh no! That's not going to work for me."*

¹⁵ Used in the sense of, I later realised, 'who rules the roost?'

¹⁶ *Alpha-tiere*, lit. 'alpha animals'

[Image 4 removed for anonymity, as depicts several members of the group]



Images 4 and 5. Common apartment, then and now: 2012 and late 2017.

Initially, my impression was of a group that had struggled through an early period of change and tension, before realising a period of stability running to the present day. In fact, it emerged that the tensions were almost always around the arrival of new members, at whatever stage, and that the tensions within the group had not entirely dissipated.

Janet was the first to put me straight on this:

Me: And that [period of argument], that was in the first two, three years right? How was it resolved do you think?

Janet: Ach noooo... ! It was over a much longer period... and sometimes I think we're not out of the woods yet! It's happened every time someone new was added. And this often brought the problems with it. [...] Every time that someone new came, the problem arose. And this wasn't just occasionally, really often – and really violent too! There would be shouting, crying, slamming doors, storming out and so on. I suppose it's true, this has not happened for a very long time. But that was the way it used to be.

As Janet admits, some degree of resolution or closure must have been found, as this was certainly not a regular occurrence by the time of my fieldwork. Although I was rarely present at the weekly plenum meetings (where such tensions had mainly played out in the past), I would have known from secondary accounts of any such incendiary incidents, and none were apparent in the period of my fieldwork. So what had changed? One answer was a practical solution, agreed by the group around the fifth year of its life, and what the members refer to as a 'Pater' system, and which is best translated as 'godfather' (or *Parterin* as 'godmother'). Each new member would be allocated their own pater/in to help them deal with the social stresses of becoming a member of the group; as Janet explained:

We felt, after a while, "right, we get this now", it's a problem. If someone new comes, to avoid these problems, their Paterin, someone from the group, can tell them how things go along, how things work with us. What might be strange or alien to someone, to avoid misunderstandings, overreactions... knowing who in the group is sensitive to different things.

Also, inevitably, LAiC's members came to a better understanding of each other, and of how arguments might arise. As Wendy put it:

There were times when some of us weren't on speaking terms, because "They have offended me!" or whatever. Or passive-aggressive, speaking to someone

else when they [the first person] were there, in the room, saying things like “Oh, you can’t say things like that in front of *her!*” But... so one is just more cautious these days. And you know yourself better. All of us... we know now where the sensitive spots are.

On reflection, the founder members themselves admitted that they were initially too rigid in defence of ‘their’ rules, but subsequently too accommodating, giving up much that they felt was important to them. Those on both ‘sides’ now admit that both approaches were misconceived, and that there should have been more openness, more negotiated solutions. Roger, for instance, sees now that the early days of the group were:

... I suppose a kind of fantasy really, of how the group might be, how we all might live together *in harmony*. [emphasizes this while laughing] Really it was a good thing, to have our expectations corrected, that each one of us had, including those who came later.

Thus, after some painful experiences, LAiC’s members do seem by and large to have found better ways of getting along, even if some of the original members feel wistfully that something has been lost in the identity of the group from how it began. It is perhaps inevitable that any such group might move from a core of like-minded members to something that is a looser fit, more encompassing construction that allows for a range of different people to participate. How the group functions now – in terms of formal social activity but also less formal relationships – and what LAiC means to its individual members, is the subject of the next section.

6.3 LAiC's life as a group: formal togetherness versus individual support

As stated in LAiC's manifesto, the group's common life was to be maintained in part through 'regular compulsory meetings and joint ventures'; the use of the word *compulsory* signifies the founding members' acknowledgement that this was a component central to the group's existence. Since first moving in, LAiC has maintained a weekly *Plenum* meeting, which has changed days but for some years has been on a Tuesday morning; all members are expected to attend unless good reason is given. The content of the meeting is largely practical, with a fixed agenda that although starting with a *Befindlichkeitsrunde* (a brief word from each member on how they are feeling that week, and explored further in Chapter 7), before going on to group diary events and management issues.

Although the meeting has often been found stressful and for some attendance has been difficult in the past – as previously noted, many of the arguments of previous years played out in this forum – no member of the group complained to me about its compulsory nature. While the Plenum meeting will be discussed in other contexts in later chapters, it is important to note here that the group recognises the importance of the weekly event as essential to the existence of LAiC; on a group day out one Friday, in response to me talking about the physical layout of space at projects such as Group One and Two, there was general agreement that the Plenum's importance lay in the fact that the group has no purpose built, physically delineated home. It contrasts with other groups mentioned, neither of whom have any formal or structured social meeting, relying on the physical arrangement of their housing in as far as their groups exist at all.

In support of the idea that the Plenum played an especially important role for LAiC, it is worth recounting that during my exploration of the wider networks of cohousing in Berlin, I interviewed an older founder member of a purpose-built cohousing project in the east of the city completed about five years ago. According to her, there was no longer any community or social activity at all, with the common space used only for storage. In short, the cohousing aspect of the project had ceased to exist altogether. She admitted that from the beginning, there had been no formalised social structure, and although not the only reason for the group's failure, she saw this as significant.

Beyond the Plenum, LAiC has a limited number of regular events attended by all members – or even a majority. Many join in with a monthly walking event, and most attend a monthly *Gesprachsabend* or ‘discussion evening’. The latter is usually better attended given that it is held in the common apartment or the garden, but also provides an occasion for greater reflection and a ‘sense’ of the group than the Plenum meetings; quite personal matters are often discussed. There are also one-off events – in most years a holiday together (this year, in lieu of that, a dinner held to celebrate the group’s tenth anniversary) and usually a group trip away to the coast at New Year.

Yet while many members emphasise the importance of these ‘full group’ activities, the main social effort – the enactment of *being* a group – is conducted more through individual friendships, informal spontaneous activities, and slightly more structured ‘sub-groups’ centred on specific interests. These subgroups might appear neutral, formal even: there is a writing group, a book group, a religious discussion group, and more than one ‘breakfast’ group. Yet some of these seem to reflect a division between the original group and newcomers, even now – in the case of the regular breakfast group – reflecting those who joined LAiC in the first five years but who then rejected *subsequent* members. Or, as another example, a close friendship group that has developed between three of the more recent arrivals.

The group as a whole is ambivalent about the extent to which its social life is structured around the original founder group as distinct from those who came later; the person who most strongly felt a sense of exclusion (Pauline) was someone who felt alienated from the group for other reasons (in greater part her apartment location, as discussed later). What is clear is that these sub-groups, and personal relationships between two or three members, were valued much more by most of the members than the social benefits of the group as a whole, in a sense more than the ‘official’ version of LAiC. Yet in comparing what members had hoped from the group when they joined (Chapter 5) with the present reality, while some related mild disappointments, only Beth seemed to feel real discontent that the group was not more like a close family or circle of close friends:

I also thought in the beginning that there would be more community – with everyone together. That the group would perform as a group. But that's not so often. The common activities you know, are three times a month – once a week, and twice – the Gesprächsabend and the days out – otherwise it's just with the people who have the strongest friendships or interests. That's how it is. There are groups within the group. There's two or three breakfast groups, who meet every couple of weeks. I'm not in any [laughs]. I have a writing group – we write our memoirs. With three others – Tina, Janet and Wendy – we meet every second Monday in the month, and read out what we have written, and have a good chat about it. It's all ok... good. But not what I expected, and almost never really all of us together. It's *not* like a family.

Beth's feeling I think grew largely out of having lived in such a remote location for more than a decade, and imagined living with the group would be entirely the opposite, a kind of full immersion in friendships. Most members claimed – albeit retrospectively – that they had never expected so much, that to try to do everything together as a group of thirteen was both impractical and unwarranted. In fact, several of the group seemed actually embarrassed by the tone of the flyer/manifesto and its ambitions, with Tina describing that aspect as sounding like:

... a sort of jolly convent. It's [the flyer] an embarrassment, I haven't read it for years. Anyway, I came [to the group] after that.

Rather, the real social benefit of the group was framed by many of the members as being the proximity and *availability* of more immediate friendships that are less like a close-knit 'gang'. As Wendy explained:

... or when I go to the movies, I go a lot to the cinema, Berlinale and so on. I never have to go alone. There is always someone who has the same interest. Today, for example, I'm going to the cinema with Beth and Judith. Or if I want something else, there's always someone to do something with, even just drink a beer. That's important to me.

What members talked about in interviews in this way underplays the value of this social reciprocity; while I was disappointed from my own research perspective that there were fewer

full-group events that I could plan to be at, there seemed to always be something going on socially between different group members. Such activity reflected modest, casual arrangements that the group made little of in interviews, and which I think the members were less aware of than, say, their responses around illness and care, which the group was more self-conscious of as a formal aim. Although I was not able to collate members' diaries in any comprehensive way, whenever I met with any of the group I would ask about what they had been up to, and it was rare that two or three members had not been off to do something together: a walk, an event, a film. Often I would bump into one or two of the members on their way to or from something, or we would discuss activities at the weekly social centre lunch; as a conversational gambit I would usually ask what the absent group members were up to, and I gradually built up an impression of the significant role played by this 'loose affiliating' between the group.

It should be acknowledged that the network of relationships in the group is partial, layered and complex, and that not every member benefits from such friendships to the same degree. This is perhaps to some degree unsurprising, but is also related to the nature and extent of relationships with those outside the group (and which form the focus of the next chapter). But also, for one member at least, limitations around the spatial arrangement of LAiC's apartments also have an impact, which is addressed in the final part of this chapter. But in summary, for most of the group, LAiC has evolved into something that is more about individual relationships than a homogenous group, and in doing so has found something perhaps of greater value: a mutual understanding and potential support that is both proximate and may in some ways go beyond what other friendships might provide.

While thus far I have examined aspects of the group social dynamics that – although they relate indirectly to the group's age-related aspirations in terms of forming a potential basis for mutual support and care – could otherwise be viewed as not age specific. The next section will turn to a discussion of how the group lives and to some extent negotiates a life together in terms of a specifically older identity.

6.4 LAiC membership as a negotiation of an ageing identity

In the previous chapter, individual motivations for joining an explicitly older group were suggested to be primarily a recognition that inter-generational groups which included young families had different and potentially unreconcilable interests. Perhaps to a lesser extent, members seemed more positively drawn to the idea of a group that shared a cohort or generational culture. This section explores how this intent to be a group of people of similar age or life stage has unfolded in practice, and the extent to which the group plays a role in forming an ageing identity, given that as noted in the previous chapter, LAiC is less close-knit and coherent as a single group than I had anticipated.

The aim here is to better understand how the complex negotiation of different aspects of ageing and identity might support or even hinder the overall success and sustainability of the group in light of its stated intent to *be* an older group. The fact that the group has aged since formation, that members' attitudes may have changed over time, is also pertinent.

Group identity through a shared life stage

While the previous chapter acknowledged the motivation by some members to be with a group of similar age, the remaining sections here (of 6.3) explore the implication and meaning of this in practice, and what this might hint about the group's capacity for mutual care. It is clear that in practice there was a kind of camaraderie and a sense of a shared outlook that is very much tied to a shared life stage. Sometimes this came out as something relatively trivial or light-hearted. The reporting of minor aches and pains sometimes became a humorous competition. A running joke for the group on one of their days out together was the performance of 'old age' – both to themselves ('now who's forgotten their glasses today?') – and for others. A minor misunderstanding when buying a ticket for entry to a public park (in fact of my making) was exaggerated into a chain of apparent deafness and misunderstanding by the whole group. There was a palpable sense of fun about these occasions, almost a sense of the pleasure taken in being part of a gang.

Issues of specific health or potential decline were often avoided, or dealt with by the group in complex ways, to the extent that this is separately discussed in some depth in Chapter 8. Yet beyond the sometime camaraderie of the group noted above, there was a mutual empathy around more substantial themes. One of these was a shared feeling or mutual acknowledgement that the members had reached a life stage where they no longer felt they had to strive for, or respond to, many of the external social and practical demands around work, marital relationships, or raising families. Instead, their circumstances within the group were seen, at least in part, as an opportunity to prioritise their own life needs. Beth felt that:

My experience is that my sense of self¹⁷ is much higher than it was before. I feel like an adult now. I feel like nobody has to tell me how I should dress. Before I thought, "How are other people dressing? I should dress the same way." Not as extreme, but something like that. And now it's all the same to me and I do what I want, and what I think is alright. This way, I control my life and lots of things are not any longer as important as they were before.

Rosie spoke similarly about how she had simplified her life down to the things that were priorities for her:

... it's about stripping away the things that I don't want anymore, that I don't need in my life anymore. For me being older means coming back to looking after myself. And I feel spiritually alive. I meditate, these kind of things are important to me, I read a lot, I'm interested in things again, like Buddhism, these things.

Of course not all of the group felt that they had reached a point in life of such equilibrium or happiness with their own sense of self. In fact, a lengthy conversation at one of the group's evening discussion (*Gesprachsabend*) centred on the disappointments and anxiety of not finding an 'inner peace' that many had imagined had previously imagined might be the case when they were older. But the point stands that these were shared discussions about how a person feels at a certain stage of life that younger cohorts might not – or rather would feel no need to understand. And for some, having the group around them over the years had been a

¹⁷ Literally she says 'self-consciousness' but I understood her meaning in context to be the opposite.

source both of support and an underpinning of a stronger identity in later life. Tina described how she has felt insecure and unhappy with herself for much of her life, especially around what she perceived as educational and class differences:

I thought to myself, “What do people think when they see me, what I look like!” Very horrible! [...] ... and everyone around me is always so highly educated and so on. I never trusted myself to speak, because I always felt so... lower class! That's all over now. I think it's also related to age. And I never said it to the others [LAIc], but I think LAiC has a great deal to do with this. They are responsible for making me feel better. For not feeling so small anymore, I feel fuller, more rounded, even though I did not study, am not from that kind of world.

This was especially interesting in Tina's case, as she later admitted (discussed in Chapter 8) to being one of those in the group least able to accept support in practical ways when ill. It is true that she did not share such sentiments with the rest of the group; in fact no-one did, at least during times when I was present with several members. In general, I was out on a group trip, there was a keenness for members to be seen as strongly independent; problems of communication (someone failing to meet at the appointed time for instance) sometimes stemmed from a surfeit of leaders in the group, each member striking out with a plan. Thus it was striking how in private – i.e. in my interviews – how much more individuals seemed to value the emotional support than seemed to be the case when together, albeit such trips were not unhappy occasions. I will return to this theme later, but I was often struck by the negotiation, balance or tension for the group around mutual support; individually they are by definition (being in LAiC) the kind of people who we might consider least in need of such close support: active, connected, with existing strong social networks. Yet they had to differing extents all given a part of their lives up to a group committed to responding to just such a need.

A LAiC identity as a shared *generation*

Using Rosie's quote above about spirituality might risk implying that the group shares a very specific culture around this or similar outlooks, but this is not the case. In fact she went on to explain how she had left a previous group and joined LAiC in order to *avoid 'all those spiritually*

and ecologically oriented people who dominated my generation', seeing in her new group a 'looser fit' and more laid-back approach in terms of group rules and broader attitudes. As previously described, the group is not bound by shared religion or political views, or even an 'activist' interest in alternative, collaborative housing or cohousing specifically.

Re-reading my field notes from the time, it seems I did not regard the shared generational culture as a prominent motivation to join the group, but this perhaps under-recognised how important that shared culture is for the group now. Not all described themselves as '68ers', but in fact nearly all of the group were. While several had political activity running through their life histories, it became clear that there was a shared set of beliefs or rather an outlook common to most of LAiC, and in fact to Group One and older members of Group Two, that was not true of all Germans of that age cohort. On more than one occasion LAiC members went on popular demonstrations together, but generational shared history often also arose in unexpected ways. When I first asked whether I should address individual members by the more formal/respectful 'Sie' or by the informal 'du', several members recounted together how their generation had rebelled against their parents' stiff formality, with the slogan *wir werden niemals 'Sie' sein* (we will never be 'You'). They claimed to be annoyed by younger people addressing them (respectfully) as Sie, in a similar way to being offered a seat by a younger person when one doesn't regard oneself as old; an example of how the members distance themselves from outdated ideas of how older people should be regarded.

There was a broadly similar political culture that meant the group could discuss current political issues or, say, sexual politics without fear of major dissent, and as previously touched on, the members come from a generation where for many, communal living of some form was, if not the norm, then an acceptable idea. But it was a deeper shared hinterland that was often 'in the air' without always being overt. On one of the group days out while having lunch, several members fell into conversation about how as children each of them had had instilled in them the imperative to finish everything on their plates – something particularly reflective of the period they grew up in, and just one small example of many conversations predicated on a shared childhood culture, with reflections on rationing and a discussion of how related attitudes around food had changed in their lifetimes. The German East/West divide that was a political fact for much of their lives occupied a frequent place in the group's conversations, not

as theoretical history but on a more personal and prosaic basis, such as childhood border crossings to reach the family's allotment garden.

It might be countered that these themes were simply something that the group had in common but not a central element that bound the group together. I noted however in the previous chapter how an attraction to this shared generational (and to a lesser extent cohort) culture still seems to resonate. More tellingly, a resident of Group One talking about the partner of another member of the group who died recently:

...she is much younger, but [David] was as old as us – our generation. He was more a person of our 'type', and she was not, and I don't think it really works that way. She's talking about leaving, as I think it's a bit hard for her. It's a big gap and I think she feels she doesn't fit, she's a different generation really.

Of course there may well be other factors at play in that particular situation, especially as Group One is a group that grew primarily from a single group of close-knit friends. Further, the idea of a shared 'lifestage' or generational culture as important for binding a group together should perhaps not be *overstated* for LAiC. Some in the group were more circumspect than has been quoted here: Janet, who I observed to be quite reserved when the group was together, claimed to me that she rarely if ever discussed private or intimate matters with the group, and hated reminiscing with stories of 'back in the day'. She was rarely forthcoming in one-to-one interviews, and I had taken her to be a restrained and peripheral member of the group. Yet in practice it gradually became clear that she was very close to particular members; I was surprised for instance to hear that she and Beth had taken on a rental contract for a house together outside Berlin.

Further, the shared culture should also not be read as excessively exclusive, or exclusionary in terms of members' day-to-day lives. There are multiple strong friendships of other ages and family ties beyond the group, which in fact are even regarded by some as having had a negative impact on group cohesion (and will be discussed in the next chapter). However, I felt that the cultural touchpoints did overall 'oil the wheels' of camaraderie and friendship in the group that

ultimately made it more possible to *be* a group. Whether there are negative, exclusionary aspects to this are discussed further, below.

A third age identity expressed through ‘the right kind of person’

While a question of how group life might be impacted by younger, i.e. middle-aged, members is explored later, a separate matter was sometimes raised in asking the group members whether they thought anyone might be too *old* to join. What began to emerge was a description of a kind of person – or rather a third age identity – that was strikingly similar for each member of the group, and could be summarised as the ‘right kind of person’ for LAiC. This ‘imaginary’ was in part defined by who is excluded. When I had first met the group, one of the things Alison and John agreed was that one great advantage of LAiC’s location was that other neighbours might apply to join without having to move (as was the case with Pauline). Yet with that one exception, it seemed otherwise very unlikely when I later asked about this. Beth used an example of a neighbour:

... who is 87, she's a widow. She has been living here for 40 years now. She's a proper *old* person¹⁸: She lives on her own, she is chronically ill, she refuses any help, she sees her life only negatively. When I talk to her – rather she talks to me – she tells me who did this and who did that and that everybody is very bad. And that she's the only good person! And about how times have changed – changed for the worse. Negative and bitter! The bitterness... And she wants to die... because she is always alone, she has no friends. She has one sister, but they are enemies. She always watches television and goes to REWE [supermarket] twice a week and... I don't know... she's desperate really. But she doesn't want any change. She is completely healthy – well, in important ways – she hears and she sees. Her legs are swollen, but... she can walk ok. She's lonely, that's the problem!

¹⁸ While in socio-gerontology the convention has been to use, in English, the term ‘older person’, in German I have never heard this, and I translate directly as ‘old’ rather than ‘older’. In large part this might be because in German the adjectival ending changes with the meaning of the sentence, i.e. while ‘old’ is ‘alt’, *the old people going* is *die alten Leute gehen*. To add the concept of *older* would be: *die älteren Leute gehen*; when I attempted such a construction, this was found confusing and seemed too specific, often drawing a response of ‘older than whom?’

Another touch point was several members' descriptions of the nearby retirement apartments into which (as previously noted) John and Roger had recently moved. Although the apartments have no care service element, Wendy's comment is typical of how the group regards the residents:

And when you go into the building, it's only old people. Everything is automatic doors, for wheelchairs. John joked that we should all move over there, it's quieter, more peaceful, because it's just old people, nothing ever happens there.

When I asked Roger whether LAiC might be expanded to include residents in his new block, he further defined the idea of the kind of person suited to senior cohousing:

No one could come from this block to ask to join LAiC, because they have lived alone for too long. The experience shows that you still have to be active yourself, if you want to enter into such a project. We used to have many children's inquiries: "My mother is so alone", or the children live far away: "Can't they come to you?". You can forget that! LAiC, or communal living generally, is no way to get out of solitude. You need to have a life of your own, be active – then you can also bring something into the group and take something out. The people who live here are simply too old, too immobile, too stuck in their ways [...]

In a sense this chimes with the view promoted by the senior cohousing movement itself in emphasizing that the model is not provided by others to passive recipients, but is made and (socially) maintained by the members (Durrett, 2009). But in practice this was interpreted through the personal, with LAiC members often distinguishing between those who had the 'right attitude' (irrespective of chronological age) and others who they regarded as 'old people'. Judith for instance:

A new person needs other things in their lives, not be reliant totally on us. We want active people, who also bring in ideas, a little bit of fresh air, something new - and not just say: "Now I'm so old, now I do not want to live alone anymore, now I want to have people around me."

Although many in the group felt that there should be an upper age limit when asked directly, when we talked about ideal new members, those same people seemed keen to point out that age was not a prerequisite, for instance Roger, in talking about someone who had nearly joined the group a few years previously:

Helge... she had lived in Arab countries for a long time. She was 82... or 84, but still sharp – bright and lively, speaks Arabic and German and English and French and – she’s still so curious about life. We said, “She could have come to us!” but she couldn’t find a suitable apartment.

Knowing the members of the group, it is easy to see what they mean in assessing potential new members: some people certainly do have more active lives and inquisitive attitudes than others, at any age. But this is also problematic. On one hand, there is a hint of exclusivity that such groups should only attract the ‘successful’ third agers (and not least because the group’s definition sometimes seemed to conflate ‘old person’ with disability). But perhaps more importantly, the emphasis that members should be strongly independent in social terms – reflective of how the members see themselves – seems at times in tension with the recognition of mutual need so clearly set out in the flyer.

6.5 Couples, singles and relationships within the group

As a group ‘open to all’, whether members are single or part of a couple is unsurprisingly not addressed by the manifesto. However, in terms of exploring who such groups are ‘for’ and how they work, it is impossible to ignore that the status of members in these terms, in a group that does aspire to live together and support each other into old age, to challenge loneliness. Many couples might imagine that support in old age would come as long as possible from their partners, and then from adult children. And while the context of gender has been addressed by some scholars in the context of senior cohousing (cf Brenton, 1999), there is less writing on the dynamics and differing needs of couples or singles; too often in the senior cohousing literature ‘older people’ have been implicitly rendered as a single, homogenous group.

This section therefore considers the lived experience of LAiC in terms of this issue, but drawing also on Group Two, as having a very different balance. As noted in the previous chapter, the LAiC group is predominantly women (ten of thirteen) all of whom are single. Of the other men, John and Roger are a couple, and Judith's former partner Clive had struggled to settle into the group. Being single was for some undoubtedly part of the motivation for joining – for one member at least, having separated prior to joining the group, for others as part of a long-term recognition of being otherwise isolated.

Group Two is weighted completely the other way, and is a useful contrast here: ten members comprising four (heterosexual) couples and two single women. For most of my fieldwork period, one of these two women was often away working (although she retired and returned to live with the group full time at the end of 2017), thus for much of the time there was only one single person in the group. When I described this balance to the LAiC members, most seemed to dislike the idea immediately: they saw their own group as something fundamentally supportive of being a single person at that stage of life. Most were also wary about new couples joining as members, given their recent experience with Judith and Clive, during which many of the members seemed to side more with Judith as the 'accepted' group member. As Amanda put it:

Most of the people I know are singles. Most of us have been like that for a long time, it's settled that way. I also find it difficult with couples – the experience we've had here – because you get the conflicts. Naja¹⁹ ... usually it gets resolved. But do you know that phrase? When you hear that "there's the shit on the steam!"²⁰ then it makes you think: "God, at my age I shouldn't have to deal with conflicts in couple relationships".

Roger by contrast places great value on being part of a couple within the group, as providing a 'social space' that is separate:

¹⁹ North-east German colloquial sound, eq. to 'yeah well'

²⁰ A literal translation here, but which I took to mean 'there's an argument brewing'

When we are in the group or do something group-related, the odd situation [here] is that everyone's living alone. Only John and I live as a couple. There are often things talked about here in Plenum: "Ooch ...! Did you hear that before? Or that?" It's very fierce, tense, then everyone has to go away and deal with it themselves [on their own]. We sit at home and can talk about it again – then it's gone, we can process that. "John, can you believe what Tina said?" Because there's two of us, that's a completely different situation than for other LAiCs! Some others in the group, always meet afterwards in pairs though, so maybe that's similar.

In Group Two, the one single woman who is there much of the time observes that she struggles with the dynamic in this regard. While she acknowledges that many of the group have working lives (as previously discussed) and that some couples are more 'open' than others, overall there is the problem that:

... the couples can take themselves away socially, they have their own lives, they can go on holiday together. But even when I was [first] here, still working, it was really difficult to participate here. Also, with married couples, it's like this: if one of you can't make something, sometimes the other one can, you can take turns, you're a unit, so you're always represented in the group that way. But I'm alone. [other single woman] and I are alone, we have no spouses. But for me I keep thinking, uhh... yeah [deep sigh], somehow I need to join in, I *must* find a way to join in here [...]

I learned from another member that this woman's predecessor, even though she joined as a close friend of others in the group, left largely because of disappointment at the lack of a shared social life together. I was told that: '*... she had very high expectations of intimacy and friendship that the group would have, but really it couldn't satisfy that*'. From my limited experience of Group Two, I learned that there were no planned activities together beyond the shared meal once a week. My interviewee quoted above was a long-term resident of that part of Berlin with strong contacts locally, and also a close friend living in a separate apartment elsewhere in the larger co-operative; her social life was entirely elsewhere. The couples in the group likewise tended to engage elsewhere as couples, and were often away for extended

periods which at times, rather like Group One, made it very difficult to maintain contact with the group.

The two groups considered here perhaps represent extremes, and it is hard to draw firm conclusions from such situations that might point toward the impact that different mixes and arrangements might have on the social commitment of group members. But it is possible to say that such dynamics are clearly important; that different weightings of group membership in these terms can produce different dynamics that are potentially exclusionary to some, or at least might imply fundamentally unmet expectations.

[An older identity as distinct from middle age?](#)

If a rejection of inter-generational groups was a response to the conflicting interests between older people and those with young families, such rejection should not be interpreted to mean that individual LAiC members have a dislike of people of younger generations, or have rejected them from their lives as a whole. It is easy to understand, for instance, why members might value frequent visits by grandchildren without wanting them around full time: the old adage was often jokingly shared with me along the lines of *'I'm very happy looking after my grandchildren, but it's good that I can give them back at the end of the day'*.

Yet I was interested to explore how the group defined its identity at the lower limit of 'older age', given the importance of being able to attract new members young enough to replenish the group in the future, and as the flyer states:

Cross-generational

Self-determined housing in old age means that you start early enough to consider how and with whom you want to spend your last years. Many people think "it's not that time yet", but actually when it is "time", it's usually too late.

This to me implies a grey area: many of us will continue to work well into our sixties, and advocates of senior cohousing have often emphasized to me the importance of beginning the process in one's 50s or earlier, meaning groups might be a mix of younger working members

still in what would widely be described as middle age, and those fully in their third age. In fact, at LAiC Roger (the youngest of the group) was still working when the group moved in together, and there was certainly no intention to exclude anyone who might be below a certain age. Indeed, some members felt frustrated that there should have been an *upper* age limit established for new recruits (as will be discussed in Chapter 7).

Yet as the only person in the group still working full time through the first five years of its existence, Roger described to me the near impossibility of being part of LAiC's group life. In a comparable situation in the present, Pauline struggles to balance being part of the group with an extended (two year) stint of jury service: a part time job in terms of commitment and weekday absence. And while some of the group felt having younger members would be simply a matter of rearranging diaries, it is notable that nearly all of LAiC's diarised activity takes place during the week (the Plenum meeting is on a Tuesday, days out on a Friday, birthday breakfasts and other irregular events often also falling on weekdays). This seems to suit the members well, as weekends tend to be kept free for families, grandchildren and other external relationships (discussed in the next chapter). In short, LAiC's shared life is entirely predicated on the more flexible life of the third age and the retiree.

It is useful to contrast this with Group Two, albeit one that neither defines itself nor set out to be an 'older' group, but whose ages (excluding the teenage son of one couple) range from early 50s to 76, and perhaps more importantly are equally split between those still working full time and those fully retired. Some of the members recognised this as problematic: that it sometimes feels like two groups, given the different daily rhythms of the two halves, as well as the limited free hours of those working. While this is occasionally awkward in terms of planning and making food, it is more notable that beyond their weekly meal on Tuesday evenings, the group shares no planned activities together. Rather, their shared experience is as a group that lives in close proximity, with contact largely domestic and based around the everyday. While it is important to note that Group Two's immediate environment is very different in social terms (there are regular meetings and social activities held by the larger co-operative, of all ages) my overall impression was one of an extended family who share a home but largely pursue their own lives outside of this.

On a visit to Group Two in summer 2018, I learned that the split had become more notable. Of the two single women in the group, one was retired at the time of my fieldwork and admitted that the group life was not what she had hoped for, and that consequently she had lowered her expectations and relied instead on friends and social contact elsewhere. Talking over this, she agreed that the problem was largely a practical one based on the different life rhythms of the two 'factions', but hinted that it was at the same time more complex:

Interviewee: The problem is, the exact age. Young people are more flexible. But the young people do not want to live with old people!

Me: No? How young are young people?

Int: Well, say 40. Would you like to live as a 40-year-old with a 70-year-old?

Me: Well I'm 47 [laughs, pauses] and I spend my whole time being with people in their 60s and 70s, so I guess yes. But... what about the people here in their 50s?

Int: I think late 40s, or 50s, things start to look different. At that stage, you start to have an openness to ageing. You think about how you will live when you're older.

The conversation moved on to other matters, but later I ask about whether everyone in the group plans to live there as long as possible, and whether this is ever talked about. Her response is quite different:

Int: ... age, and health and so on? Do we deal with it? No. The topic is left hanging. That's a sensitive subject, not something the younger ones would want to talk about. That's one, two, three, four, five [counting the group] ... Half is in their 50's, early to mid-50s. But I don't think people in their mid-70s talk to people in their mid-50s about it. I don't think you can find anything in common. That's 20 years difference! The topic is seen very differently by 50 somethings, they are still... they still think there's time to do more things!

The other single woman had travelled extensively for her work, but as of early 2018 had retired fully, and told me of her significant disappointment that life in the group was similarly not as she had hoped, with most of the members having no '*emotional commitment or engagement*' with its life. In fact 'commitment' is a key word in this context. Although one of the couples in the group had been deeply involved in the creation, design and construction of the whole co-operative and their own cohousing cluster, they (and some other members) did not regard the project as a 'home for life', and neither did they think of themselves as old enough to need to make such a commitment.

As previously noted, the group members never claimed to be a senior cohousing group or to have committed to its principles, thus it is entirely possible that others of a similar (young age) who had made such a commitment might feel very differently. Yet it is notable that at least some of the older members had made an assumption that the group might become a kind of senior group, but now feel there is an incompatibility that is more than just a practical one, that hints at a lack of understanding. LAiC have no such similar experience to be able to compare, but the following sections focus instead on the shared experience of being a closer cohort in terms of age.

6.6 The cohousing 'spatial ideal', and LAiC's compromise

As described in Chapter 4, the original core LAiC group eventually began their lives together with a move into apartments in an existing block, itself part of a larger social housing estate in south-east Berlin. All members rent their apartments from the (publicly owned) social housing company that runs the estate, including an additional thirteenth apartment that serves as the common space. This is an unusual – if not unique – path for a senior cohousing group to have taken, but as noted in Chapter 2 is a possibility that the movement in the UK is also interested in pursuing, as so-called 'retrofit' projects. Thus LAiC also provided an opportunity to explore the challenges or benefits that the arrangement has led to, given the importance placed on very particular design models and methods by the senior cohousing movement. The question of to what extent the group is 'in charge', as opposed to the estate management company, is also an issue for LAiC as renters, and is returned to in Chapter 8.

The arrangement was accepted by LAiC's members as a necessary compromise, abandoning the original aim of a 'traditional' cohousing project with apartments clustered more closely around a common space, with access to the whole being exclusive to the group (as at the Group Two project). The group's apartments are thus 'pepper-potted' in between other (non-LAiC) residents, albeit with all but two of the apartments clustered around a single block entrance and access staircase. Perhaps more problematically, the shared apartment, rented jointly by the group members, is tucked away at a lower level, the furthest point from many of the group rather than being at its physical heart.

Actually, when I talked to LAiC members about the more communal arrangement at Groups One and Two, several felt that this might have been a preference when younger, but now would be 'too studenty', and that they much preferred their own space – not just the privacy of their own apartments, but the semi-anonymity of the estate's circulation areas. In fact, overall the group have a strong preference for the pepper-potting over a 'closed cluster' arrangement. Roger, an original group member, still clung to his strong preference for the original plan in which members would *'enter downstairs into one big room, which everyone has to go through'*, but this was noted by others to be unusual; for most, there is a good balance between physical proximity to other group members and day-to-day privacy. Amanda was typical in describing how:

For me, I find it good to live in a house, in which our group is not alone, but rather is part of a block with other people. I like the balance between nearness and distance. I know that the 'proper' [motions this with her hand] cohousing you mentioned has more community. But for me it's OK, I think it's good.

Janet hinted that there was an aspect of privacy to the arrangement. The nature of the estate design is that while you might often bump in to neighbours in the corridors and stairs, it would be hard to monitor the comings and goings of a particular individual, so that:

... you can be left alone if you want to be, spend some time on your own for a few days if you want. I like it that I know there's LAiCs next door, or two doors away. But I don't think I'd like what you've described, that I had to sneak in and

out through the common room... I'm not always in the mood to be sociable like that! We like to be close, but not that close!

Janet goes further, recalling how during the earlier periods of tension in the group: *'... for a while, it was a place where you did not like to go at all and leave as quickly as you could when the atmosphere was heavy'*. She agreed with me that this would have been impossible in a cluster arrangement such as Group Two's. Wendy related to me how she likes bumping into neighbours whether a part of the group or not, and feels she can *'move around freely, without the social control always there [in cluster groups]'*. She is close friends with her neighbour – a woman of a similar age to the group average – who despite not being a part of the group sometimes joins open events such as the monthly walking day. Wendy described how in summer they both leave their front doors open (which are the only two opposite each other at the top of a staircase) and interact freely. There is though a strict boundary for membership: although the neighbour has considered joining, the group is clear that she is not considered a member, and in fact this relationship seems in any case to be an exception – members describe themselves as getting along with other neighbours, but there is little evidence of anything more than this.

Thus it does seem that the pepper-potting arrangement, being mixed in with other residents, provides a 'comfortable' level of closeness and privacy, produced to some degree by the physical arrangement, but also perhaps by the more psychological effect of not feeling 'contained' within the group. There are however clear limits to the degree of physical detachment.

The problem with outliers

Such 'porosity' between those in the group clustered together has the effect however of emphasising the physical remoteness of some of the other members, i.e. the three who live elsewhere on the estate. Pauline – who already lived in her apartment and joined the group without relocating – sees her 'outlier' location as a significant problem, claiming it as the core

reason she is considering leaving the group. She compares it negatively with a previous home she shared with others in Dresden (also a retro-fit but much closer to a 'cluster group' in physical form), describing how she only ever meets other group members by appointment, with none of the sense of living together that accidental, often serendipitous, contact brings. While admitting that a long period of jury service is also restricting her involvement, she emphasized on several occasions on the importance of 'living under one roof' for the success of any intentional community.

Roger and John moved away from the group to an apartment in a nearby block by choice (reportedly to gain a small private garden), feeling that as founder members and as a couple they would not lack social contact, and that their move would be uncontentious. Others felt differently:

We [the rest of the group] were annoyed for a long time. Shocked. Outraged! Because we've always said, "That's why we live in one block, that's what the group *is*." And then they just moved away - without first talking to us. I haven't visited them for almost a year! I said, "You can come to me - I'm not leaving!" because that was such a break. A break from the ideal.

This suggests that LAiC's arrangement of apartments that are mainly proximate and accessed via a single staircase, albeit mixed in among other non-group residents, is workable, there is a limit; that serendipitous contact, a 'feeling' of being together is essential, and is something that is openly expressed as important by the group.

The social importance of the shared space

The contrast between LAiC's spatial arrangement and the more intimate, sociable 'feel' of the Group One and Group Two designs is striking when spending time in each, and made Group Two in particular seem superficially like more of a successful group in social terms. Most mornings – I tended to visit after those in the group still working had headed out – one or two of the retired members might be around in the shared space, chatting or having an extended breakfast in the sunshine on the shared balcony. On one occasion my wife and I were invited

to dinner with the whole group – a regular Tuesday evening occurrence – along with one or two other friends of the group and neighbours from another cluster at same co-operative development. One member described how:

So, after eating or after cooking sometimes we stay up till midnight, one in the morning, talking, or discussing. And we have a lot of visitors staying in the [shared] guest room, like three days or two weeks. So there's always something going on. There are visitors – [and if the host] wants to do dinner for them, then they include everybody, and that's always a great experience for the visitors. They just won't leave! [laughs]. It's not every day, but it happens a lot. [...] We do a community shop for the food, everything that is downstairs, is food for everybody. We rotate kitchen duty, so you're doing it [once a week] every three months.

Yet as I got to know some of the Group Two members better, it became clear that the group's social existence was *only* really through the informal activity in the kitchen/dining space, including the weekly meals, with members admitting that the rest of their social activity is elsewhere, albeit often connected to the larger co-operative. Further, such socialising had become increasingly intermittent over time, reflecting increasing disillusionment with the group by some members, and tensions between others. Although there had been disagreements around some particular aspects of the shared space, the tensions that have arisen seemed more to do with other factors, at least in part with the friction between the needs and lifestyles of those who were single and those in couples, and also between the relatively younger members still working and those retired, both as explored earlier. One member however did point out to me that while some of the group have quite substantial apartments – multiple-roomed homes in which '*you can close the front door on the rest of the world*' – others (the single residents) have only bedsits, and might find it more claustrophobic to withdraw from the group's presence in times of social stress.

At LAiC, the fact that the apartments were not connected to each other via space exclusive to the group was regarded as unproblematic, even a preference. The design and location of the shared apartment was another matter, however. The apartment is essentially a bedsit, the smallest configuration available on the estate and preferred by the group as the rental cost is

shared equally. It comprises a small kitchen, a bathroom (used as a laundry²¹) and a single central room, in which the space is entirely taken up by a central office-style table and the seating around it. The décor is rather bland, and the overall effect is one of functionality rather than cosiness, blamed in part by some members on the need to compromise over differing tastes (as noted earlier in this chapter).

The greater problem though is the space's location. While it has a pleasant terrace giving access out onto the landscaped courtyard in the core of the block, the access to the flat entrance door is at the bottom of a rather gloomy stairwell, separated from many of the group and not directly off the main staircase. Members have to consciously decide to go there from another part of the block, and this rarely if ever happens spontaneously; the group lacks the chance encounters, serendipitous meetings and general sense of communality claimed to be such an important social glue for the cohousing model. There is little sense of ownership of the space in the way that Group Two's equivalent areas are; in the latter, the feeling as a visitor is one of being within someone's private apartment.

The space is thus used primarily for the weekly plenum meeting and occasional events such as birthdays and other planned meetings. There is some irregular use: the bathroom also houses washing machines and drying space used by all of the group (a significant cost saving to individual members). A fold-down bed, concealed during the day, often serves for friends or relatives of group members staying over. The space was also often useful for my one-on-one interviews, especially at an early stage when it could be used as a neutral space. Other members would occasionally come and go with their washing during these meetings, which made me wonder how useful the flat really was for others to stay over. Although this undoubtedly did happen on occasion, the meeting tables would have to be squeezed aside in a space that is essentially a single room with a kitchenette leading from it; Alison mentioned to me offhandedly that 'obviously' guests had to pack everything up in the daytime in case the space was needed, and there was of course the coming and going of those with their washing. The arrangement seemed inconvenient from the perspective of both the guest and the rest of

²¹ It is usual for washing machines in Germany to be located in the bathroom. LAiC have adapted theirs with two machines by removing the shower cubicle.

the group, useful perhaps at a push, but not comparable with the separate guest rooms included in the design of the Group One and Group Two projects (and a feature in fact of most new cohousing).

It is telling that on some less formal occasions – or especially an extended group – has needed space, individual homes are used. Beth told of how on one occasion she had hosted:

... all the grandchildren, daughters and husbands and grandmothers together here in the apartment. We made a circle, and in the middle were all the grandchildren. It was great, because we had some space, and it's just a bit more relaxed, better for doing that sort of thing.

More regularly, smaller groups of members meet for meals or drinks together in the flat, but all such arrangements are partial or selective, and often reflect individual friendships and sub-groups. And given that not all members get on together all of the time, no individual apartment is a neutral space in the way that the common apartment might be. Beth's example above is a good one, in that it illustrates a 'schism' that will be discussed later in this chapter: not all members have grandchildren, and such an event, spontaneously arranged, might feel exclusionary to some. Some in the group have apparently even argued that the common apartment is not needed, suggesting that all planned events are hosted by those with larger apartments (and thus saving money). Others – mainly the later arrivals – feel the common space should be used much more. Rosie feels that the original group members take the social functioning of the group for granted, describing how *'they already have their thing going on, they don't need to make the social effort in the same way'*.

LAiC's continued existence after a decade shows that a senior cohousing group *can* live without a purpose-built home, and even has some aspects that members find preferable. But there are indications that the group's current arrangement is not ideal. While most members are happy with their own individual locations within the main cluster, other aspects, namely the awkward location of the common house, and the partial physical estrangement of the 'outlier' members are less successful; while these have been negotiated around, there seems a risk that the arrangement might contribute to a loss of focus, reduced to a residents' association rather than a form of co-living.

Yet conversely, these problems have forced the group over the years to survive almost entirely as a social construction, through the social interaction, rules and planned activity that members consciously maintain. This contrasts starkly with Group Two and especially with Group One – where great thought was put into ensuring the social through the built form but is much more limited in practice, and a demonstration that such efforts do not guarantee that cohousing will exist.

6.7 Summary and discussion

This chapter has explored various aspects of LAiC's life together that reflect a more complex and evolving set of interactions *within* the group than might be implied by the original aims of the flyer, or indeed by the wider aims of the senior cohousing model. The themes explored stand separately to some extent, with some relating more directly to ageing as a group than others. Yet these different aspects of LAiC's social dynamics are important to relate here, not only because they might better inform us about the potential challenges for those planning senior cohousing projects, but to contextualise discussion in later chapters that relate to the relative decline of the group.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the group has done more than survive over the decade or so of its existence, as a pioneering project, and in its current form offers something genuinely of value to its members. LAiC has to a greater extent grown through an early period of tension and conflict, into something that while not perhaps the close-knit 'almost family' that was originally envisaged by some, is instead a looser fit social structure: a 'framework' in which a more limited sharing of lives is negotiated, and that reflects the reality of a greater diversity of people with different levels of commitment and attachment to the group.

Is this the reciprocity that is envisaged for senior cohousing? The material presented here has perhaps suggested a partial or uneven structure of relationships within the group, in turn reflected in the levels of support members might offer each other. The concept of the framework on one hand could be viewed as somewhat instrumental – a fallback 'deal' while

the strong social bonds of close friends and family are developed elsewhere. On reflection, I see that this might have reflected my own approach to the research, as I gave little consideration to wider understandings of reciprocity and mutual support, viewing the supportive aim as simply transactional within the group, neglecting such issues as ‘caring for the carer’, by which communities such as LAiC might have a wider supportive role to play beyond its own boundaries. Whether by coincidence or by a self-selecting effect whereby fewer caring responsibilities have made it easier to focus on projects such as cohousing, none of the group still has a significant caring role for a parent themselves (albeit care is given down the generations, as will be discussed in the next chapter). And it is clear that members have struggled with the flyer’s reminder that each member is ‘...needed, [is] not just a set of needs’. There is a notable tension for the members between recognising the value of reciprocity, and fearing being perceived as ‘needy’ in a way that the group seems to reject in others, expressed through a shared idea of the ‘right kind of member’ – someone strongly socially independent, an active, outgoing third ager. It could even be argued that the tension is inherent in the senior cohousing concept itself, between the declaration of independence as a group, and the search for reciprocity, inter-dependence, within it.

It is important however not to *underplay* the extent of reciprocal support that exists within the LAiC group. In comparison with Group Two for instance – albeit that such aims were never explicitly set out – the latter has no such mutual sense of support, even though the older, single members of the group clearly had expectations of it. The group’s self-described ‘framework’, and the various relationships within the group, I would argue represent something that goes beyond the instrumental, that Glass (2016) would categorise as falling firmly under emotional support.

Further, it should be considered whether the two themes of a shared age culture, and of couples and singles in groups – thus far examined as separate strands – might play a role in making such support more possible. It is clear that LAiC do share a cohort culture to a greater degree: a shared life stage – of retirement and of being regarded by others as ‘older people’. Further, Group Two’s experience hints at the fact that there may be significant challenges for groups that are a mix of retirees and those in middle age (or younger) still working. For both Groups One and Two, a cultural divide in outlook and understanding is hinted at, raising the

question not of necessarily of whether a person in their 50s can empathise with someone in their 70s, but whether the former's focus is elsewhere to the detriment of the latter. Similarly, in such small groups as these, the very different social needs of couples and singles also suggests potential disharmony; as almost entirely a group of older single people, LAiC's members by default share a set of needs that the dominance of couples in Group Two seems unable to respond to for its own single members.

Finally, an important question that should be addressed here is the effect on group coherence of LAiC's compromise of moving into an existing estate and its 'pepper-pot' arrangement, as opposed to the development of a bespoke housing project where the group members have led the decision-making in the physical arrangement of their homes around shared facilities. In fact, so central is the co-design in the cohousing literature that a purist interpretation might not regard LAiC as a cohousing group at all. While the group has endured as a social entity for more than a decade, it is important to consider the extent to which the architectural compromise might have impacted on how LAiC's life together might have been different.

Certainly, there is a lack of a central role for the shared apartment, in its location and flexibility as a space: the limited kitchen and small central room are not what the group would have designed for themselves. And the three physical 'outliers' in the group are clearly an issue in this context, especially for Pauline, who feels that her physical distance from the group results in a social distance. The two men claim this is much less of a problem, but they are group founders, by many accounts the social 'centre' of LAiC and thus more able to maintain those links despite being a block away. Nonetheless, the group's arrangement seems to stretch the spatial concept of cohousing almost to breaking point, and it seems impossible that it has not negatively impacted on the group's social cohesion over the years.

Yet group membership remains firmly defined; while the nature of members' relationships with those outside the group is a significant issue (discussed in the next chapter), these links are largely not with neighbours others on the estate, and there is little evidence of social porosity in neighbourhood relations more broadly. In fact, Wendy's closeness to her neighbour (whose front door faces hers as a pair of flats at the top end of a staircase) is the exception; for the most part members describe doing odd favours – taking in parcels and so on – but there

is little evidence with *non*-LAIc neighbours of a deeper reciprocity or caring relationships among neighbours that were considered through the literature in Chapter 2. Might there have been more social porosity, stronger bonding ties with other neighbours if those neighbours had been more similar especially in terms of social class, ethnicity and age, or if the members had stronger roots in locally? Based on LAiC's experience, it is not possible to make a definitive statement. But it is clear, in the case of the three Berlin groups considered and certainly multiple groups in the UK, that the 'implanting' of cohousing groups into a particular location and neighbourhood will continue to be a phenomenon.

Chapter 7: External distractions: LAiC's lived experience as defined by connections beyond the group

Living in the city's [estate] district doesn't worry this group of old people. 'Although if you're in a bad mood', says [Alison], 'then being in this neighbourhood can intensify that. Then you have the group here to recharge your batteries'.

But doesn't that sound a bit too much like staying in your own world? No, says [Alison], they've become friends with their Polish neighbours and invite each other round. The Turkish and Macedonian kids and parents in the block all know them, the LAiCs help with kids' homework. But an African neighbour helps them [Alison and her husband], when their car is stuck in the Berlin winter snow – or Turkish schoolchildren cook sausage, peas and mashed potato for them at the local neighbourhood club.

3 March 2011, quoted from article in national newspaper

7.1 Introduction

It emerged early in my fieldwork that the level of LAiC's organised social interaction was not as intense as I had thought; I had imagined that my exploration of the group dynamic would focus largely on regular social interaction between group members. Certainly, the activities that had been described to me through early contact – the weekly compulsory Plenum, monthly daytrips together and Sunday evening discussion session continued to occur. There were also stronger friendship links among smaller groups within LAiC. But it also became clear as time progressed that the lessening of activity as a full group was not that the members had withdrawn into themselves, but because most seemed to have extensive social lives and commitments elsewhere.

This chapter, while continuing to draw on participative observation with the group, widens the scope to address other interactions and relationships. Once more cues are taken from some

of the aims set out in the flyer, and the chapter begins by exploring how successful the group has been in achieving specific aims; for instance engaging with the community locally and promoting the senior cohousing concept. It goes on to consider how these activities and wider social contact beyond the group illustrate the complexities of negotiating an individual and group identity. Contrasting these wider social interactions against those within the group helps to further define what LAiC means to its members and what value they place on its friendships and support: in this instance I took a more provocative stance, pushing members to explain why they might prioritise one relationship over another in different contexts. Finally, the chapter examines the commitment to relationships outside the group – primarily with members’ children and the relatively recent arrival of grandchildren – and particularly the influence these have had on the social intensity and cohesion of the group, both positively and negatively.

7.2 Active engagement as LAiC members

LAiC’s flyer sets great store in making not just a social commitment to *each other* as a group, but to making a broader commitment to be both ‘politically-socially engaged’ and to become socially engaged in the immediate neighbourhood. Further, the manifesto calls for the senior cohousing model is to be promoted by the group locally, to raise awareness as a ‘part of an innovative housing policy’.

As noted in Chapter 2, the cohousing movement includes among its aims the maintaining of social networks and engagement with the wider neighbourhood, responding to the critique that intentional communities are de facto gated communities, sealed off from the wider social fabric. And while this ambition is not specific to *senior* cohousing groups, the latter are also positioned by writers on the subject as representing the polar opposite of the often closed and isolating nature of retirement housing generally, and ultimately to the fourth age disconnection of the care home.

This chapter will examine how successful LAiC’s aim of social engagement has been in itself, but will move on to consider what the pursuit of such an ideal might suggest in the context of the negotiation of a third age, i.e. the extent to which the group has successfully demonstrate,

to itself, and to others, that they can challenge the stereotype of passive, powerless ‘old people’. It concludes by looking at how such structured engagement has weathered in the face of a general slowing down of the group’s activity, but also is increasingly in competition with other aspects of members’ lives (especially family commitments) that form later sections of this chapter. While there is often no clear dividing line between members’ purely social bonds and engagement for instance in local politics, a broad distinction has been drawn here in order to consider the kind of social activity that the individuals regard primarily as ‘activity’ rather than as ‘relationships’, i.e. friendship or family bonds.

Nearly every member of the group is involved in multiple occupations and endeavours outside of the group. Some of these are locally-based, and a response to LAiC’s conscious commitment to engage. Other activities include membership of choirs (more than one member, more than one choir), a life-long engagement with the LGBTQ rights movement (both in and out of the church), and two members heavily involved (for decades) with local party politics and political campaigns respectively, to give examples. It might be easy to interpret such activity as signalling a resistance to stereotypes of behaviour attributed to older people (primarily passive ones), but it is important to acknowledge that the day-to-day engagement of the members was more than simply the pursuit of ‘hobbies’. As touched on in Chapter 2, the boundaries around paid work and lifelong engagement in a field are not always clear cut, and that roles which society deems ‘useful’ – i.e. paid – could be argued as partly socially imposed, constructed boundaries. My own prejudice was challenged when I dropped in on Alison one day to find her surrounded by paperwork and doing her tax return, to give one example. When she had initially mentioned to me that she still worked part time, I had an image of someone ‘helping out’ somewhere; in fact, she continues to work two days a week using her background as a psychoanalyst to run a recovery workshop for drug addiction. In a different way, Tina described how her life-long involvement in local party politics had in effect become a part-time job since retirement:

Back in [southern Germany] I was working, and bringing up my daughter, and I just didn’t have the time. Now I’ve come to Berlin – first semi-retired, but now fully retired – and I have the time. I thought about it and said to myself: “I really ought to do more!”

While I did not perceive that any of the activity was driven primarily by a sense of ‘performing’ a third age of activity and engagement for its own sake, there was sometimes a conscious idea of rejecting ‘old person’ stereotypes. As Amanda commented, when I asked her about the ages of the people she worked with:

I would hate them to be... Well, I would hate to be doing... there’s this and that for seniors: knitting circles and that sort of thing. That would *not* be my thing at all, just to go from one group of seniors [LAIc] to another one! I’d rather be involved across the spectrum,²² with people of all ages.

It seemed doubtful that Amanda even knew of an actual knitting circle. Rather, it seemed to chime more with the group’s shared imaginary as the inverse of the ‘right kind of person’ discussed in the last chapter. And while, as noted above, not every activity done by a person in post-retirement represents a resistance to ageing stereotypes, or a performance of third age values, it was in the field of local engagement – the part of LAiC’s existence that was the most conscious undertaking in presenting itself to the outside world – that such possibilities were best revealed. By the same token, a reduction or stepping back from such activity by members might signify a dissipation of the group, a loss of confidence in its identity.

Connecting locally

When I first made contact with LAiC prior to the fieldwork back in 2016, one of the most striking things about that first meeting (with founder members Alison and Roger) was the emphasis they put on telling me about the group’s success at integrating locally, at being the opposite of a closed community. Roger had brought along a community engagement award that LAiC had received, together with a newspaper article about it, as well as a gift from the local Turkish cultural centre, and was clearly proud of these. The district, and LAiC’s estate in particular are areas of historically high deprivation, with a high proportion of ethnic minorities. Consequently, both the local authority and the estate management company have for several

²² A more literal translation is ‘across the social average’.

years supported activity that better integrates the predominantly Turkish-background residents. As Roger later told me:

For us, it was clear from the beginning that when we lived together, we would also become involved in our Kiez [locality]. We didn't want to land here from another planet, and live just as a group. We wanted to carry the idea outwards... and that's what we did! [Jean] was a tenant advisor, I was the spokesperson for the tenants, we were busy on the management board, some people did reading support for local kids... all kinds of things, but we got stuck in. We '*engaged*'! [laughs, using the word in English, aware of its overuse as a buzzword]

Indeed, LAiC are not only engaged locally, but were quite dominant in some respects: I heard from others outside the group that several members had key positions on the estate's tenant management board. As Wendy put it when I asked her (as one of those involved), it was '*... not because we want to have everything controlled by LAiC. But all the initiatives – Tenant Council, Quartier Management, and so on – no-one else gets involved.*' I wondered if this was in part also because LAiC are essentially an educated middle class group, with time available and experience of organising, who have landed in a more multi-cultural location. Being involved in the local housing management is also clearly very important to the group, as illustrated by the pride with which several members related John's lobbying skills in obtaining an additional flat for Judith, something apparently not strictly possible under current state rules. This in turn illustrated a broader point: that as a renters' group without any other real control over their homes, good relations with those that do have such powers are essential.

Roger and other founder members have been successful in imbuing the importance of local engagement in those who joined later: and although the degree of involvement varies between individual members it is clear that LAiC have taken the concept seriously. Many of the group remain engaged in local community projects or related supporting activity. Roger for one is involved in a number of activities, and I'd often see him around the estate busy with various groups. On one occasion, as we met for coffee, he was interrupted by a phone call from a local support charity: '*a refugee is looking for a washing machine*' he explained, and began calling others for help. Several other members mentioned similar work they'd been involved in, and I'd sometimes bump into one of them out doing something with one or two of their Turkish-

German neighbours. Beth, a later arrival to the group was one of the most locally involved in a number of different pursuits, which often came up in our conversations:

So I got involved with Madonna.

[*Me: Madonna?*]

You don't know it? It's a great project, which exists to help young Muslim girls learn self-worth, to emancipate them a little you might say, they look after the girls with homework and everything they can. It's here on the corner. I've done tutoring there. And down there [gestures from where we sit on her balcony] is a Turkish cafe – I asked if someone would teach me a bit of Turkish, because the teachers in my colleges couldn't take me any further. I go there once a week to speak Turkish, with a Turkish woman who works there. In any case, I feel very much at home here in the neighbourhood. I come out: "Hello", "Good day" and so on – I find that really nice.

Of course, it might be the case that members take a pride in just being good members of the community, that such activity is not related to feelings about age at all, or a commitment to the group's aims. But I often did have a sense from individual stories that emphasized a pride in going against age stereotypes. More than one of the group made reference to the news article referenced at the beginning of this chapter, whose theme is how surprising it is for a group of older middle class people to move to somewhere so 'urban'. The implication was that the group were keen to demonstrate LAiC's ability to integrate with a predominantly younger population on the estate. Janet related a story that underlined this, when talking about tensions between LAiC and others on the estate:

When one of the group joined a couple of years ago, they came and said "The first thing I'm going to do is organise a neighbourhood party, I don't care what anyone says". A pity really, as she had lots of energy to do it, but hadn't realised it was not so easy. So we've never really tried it... I think what works better, is how we're involved locally in other things. It shows us differently. They might think: "Oh, just some old German people²³, idling away." But when LAiC moved in here... we played a really special role, prominent. Not just because we were

²³ From my own experience, there is an acceptance in German society, even among otherwise more liberal-minded or left-leaning Berliners, to refer to white Germans as 'Germans', and other ethnic groups, in particular those of Turkish descent in the city not as 'Turkish Germans' but as 'Turkish'.

middle class. We do much more, I think, than many who are much younger, and that has surprised people.

[Image 6 removed, for preservation of anonymity of individuals]

Image 6. Image of a poster the group displayed in the basement level of the block. I did not fully understand how it came about, but was apparently taken at a local event (Alison and her husband are the two on the left).

Local engagement, ageism, and a gradual withdrawal

I wondered though whether there was also an element of this attitude that was a response to specific experiences of ageism locally or in the members' day-to-day lives. As discussed in Chapter 2, one theme often raised in the literature exploring communities of older people has been the extent to which the rest of society marginalises or stereotypes older people, and how those communities present a response to this. There was certainly evidence that individual members of the group suffered some degree of ageism, that they usually described to me through minor incidents as a kind of 'everyday ageism' that seemed to be expected. Beth, who lived abroad for much of her life, described it in this way:

[When I left Germany] I was a young woman with red hair. When I came back I was an old woman with white hair. Now people give up their seat on the bus. I'm fine with that, but it's different, naturally you feel different when that happens. [...] I suppose... yes, young people, the kids round the estate here, are quite rude, I don't think they see an old person at all, especially not old women, I think that's sort of invisible, to them.

There was also a slight annoyance among group members about the depiction of LAiC in the press: an article in one national newspaper (dating from 2011, not referenced here to maintain group anonymity) on LAiC choosing such an urban location in central Berlin, describes the group in terms of amazement that a person over 65 might achieve anything significant through their own agency. Tina, for one, in her extensive work over many years in local party politics, expressed mild annoyance at being asked to take on an additional role as 'party representative for senior members'. Amanda, who is connected to several broadly anti-capitalist groups focussed on specific issues, acknowledged that age and generation sometimes inevitably played a part in such activity, but did not feel this was ageist as such:

... many in the political movement, like [her group], are older. The very young, I think, go more for the single issue, more confrontational movements, like here in Berlin they're against high rents, gentrification. Anti-capitalist groups, they're usually younger! We are anti-capitalist too [laughs], but maybe it's the same in England, there are always groups that are more radical.

Jim: The younger ones are in the movements that they think are more exciting?

Amanda: Yes! I think that many young people want to be in more radical movements. In [her group], it's because... well, we do 'actions', but we also do academic research work. That needs continuity. Many older people have more time, that's true. And many people in their 40s are working on their careers. We 60-, 70-year-olds have a lot of time. Plus, we were already in the student movement for example and are glad that there are still groups like this now.

Overall these were isolated instances, however. While I have no doubt that members experienced ageism in their everyday lives – Alison for instance shared a story to the group

one morning of the patronising attitude of a bank employee, for instance – it is less clear that such attitudes impacted directly on LAiC’s motivations to maintain local involvement. There has been a notable withdrawal from some of this activity for various reasons, some of them practical, some more complex. Both Beth and Roger had been working on a gardening project on the estate, headed by a local co-operative business that hosts a range of projects and activities, but recently both have stepped back from their involvement. In Roger’s case, he has been unable to do much recently because of a back injury that has seen him in and out of hospital, and has restricted him from heavy physical activity:

I do some planting with the raised beds. But the other day was a big planting event – they had to move a lot of earth, and I’m not so keen on that. First because of my back, I can’t... But I have a foot in there and I feel good and I’m just happy to have my little bed and plant a bit. Otherwise this whole thing with [the co-operative]... it’s great! But I can’t get involved in the way I would have done a few years ago.

Certainly, it is true that with some in the group approaching their 80s, there has been an inevitable physical slowing down that is reflected in a diminishment of such activity (and will be discussed in Chapter 8). However, Roger also hints at another reason he had previously already become less involved, a difficulty in engaging across the generations:

It’s a good thing! Sustainable and so on. But it’s a different generation! These are all young hipsters [we both laugh], 20- and 25-year-olds, young people from around the whole world – Spanish, Italian, British. And it’s all in English ... This is another world! A lovely world, but a different world!

While Roger seemed wistful, but remains involved to some extent, Beth seemed quite fed up. While she remains a highly energetic person, she made an interesting comment (while out walking together) that she no longer feels LAiC have to ‘prove’ anything by these actions, when each member could be prioritising something better with their time. For her, when I followed this up in an interview, a particular incident had been the last straw:

... I had my tomatoes, and they were growing really well. I had kilos of green tomatoes. One day, I arrived... and it was all destroyed! All the green tomatoes were scattered around. I said, "Shit! It's the boys who hang around here...". The next week I thought maybe the tomatoes would be turning red now and I could have at least a few – they'd left some, three or four – and I saw two boys. One had a tomato in his hand, eating it, and the others were all scattered around, and I said to them, "You're the ones who are stealing my tomatoes!" "No, it's not us!" they said. "What's that in your hand then?" I said. "Go away, grandma! Go away!" [Beth's delivery here implies they used a stronger term] And one of them was really angry, saying "Who are you? We know the guy who's in charge of the whole thing, and he'll show you who's the boss, old granny!" Children of twelve, 13, 14 years old... I don't know if they were connected to [the co-operative] or not. So that was it. I thought, "Shit!" And that was about the time we'd started renting the house outside Berlin [with Janet, also LAiC]. I have a big garden there and I'm working there to make it fertile and digging it all over. So I have my own garden now, I don't need all the hassle any more. That's why I said: "No, enough. I'm leaving". I'm not going to share [my time] any more.

The incident could be viewed as in part reflecting the difficulty of the group being an 'odd fit' on the estate: LAiC is essentially a group of older, white women, in a locality that is predominantly younger, and ethnically Turkish and Arabic. Some members mentioned tensions with individual men on the estate, perhaps triggered in part by resentment over the group's 'preferential' apartment (LaiC were encouraged to move in with an offer to refurbish their homes to a higher standard than their neighbours). But to me Beth's story encapsulates a combination of factors that hint at why increasingly LAiC have scaled back such involvement: a weariness at lack of empathy or understanding from younger generations, coupled with a wish to prioritise other more personally rewarding activity over something that many in the group feel no longer committed to.

Another story that illustrates a gradual withdrawal of the group on all fronts, in terms of promoting the senior cohousing concept and actively demonstrating its values – in cases a reticence about being promoted as a group at all. Certainly over recent years members have become less interested in doing pieces for the media. John, perceived by many in the group to be its nominal leader, had vowed to do no further interviews (including with me) following his unhappiness with a national newspaper piece earlier that year. The item was actually about his

relationship with the church, and not to do with LAiC or even housing more generally, but it represented a small marker in a wider picture of gradual disengagement. During the fieldwork, I extended and built on some existing contacts and became more connected to the Berlin cohousing 'scene'. LAiC were however notable in their absence from this sphere, despite Roger for one having been quite involved with earlier campaigning in LAiC's formative days. Over the course of my time in Berlin I met several people involved in other projects who had known him well, and who asked after him and the group. Further, toward the end of my period in the city I was involved in a community housing conference that by coincidence took place at the co-operative project to which Beth and Roger were connected (above), that included a workshop session specifically on senior cohousing; as my gatekeeper, I invited Alison to take part, and she happily did so. However, I was surprised that despite the event being literally on LAiC's doorstep, the rest of the group seemed to feel that it was something Alison should attend because of her connection to me, but were otherwise entirely uninterested.

An earlier unrelated incident began to seem like part of a pattern less of individual slowing down or disengagement, but an unwillingness to be perceived as a group at all. It arose in the early days of my fieldwork, as I attempted to become more actively engaged with LAiC and its local connections, and which I had hoped would be my key to getting closer to the members. While ultimately disappointing in research terms, it does present a slightly different perspective on how the group engages locally and how it defines itself.

The local community centre – the project's name not used here – is an intrinsic part of the fabric of the estate (both physical and social) and was in fact LAiC's original point of connection to their locating in the estate. Every Wednesday, a different business or group from the neighbourhood – the local job centre, students, the police – takes a turn preparing a lunch for up to 50 local residents, open to all. The attendees are almost entirely older, largely female, and I assume are drawn from the wider area than just the (predominantly Turkish-origin) estate itself. Also, the cohousing group currently in formation and which largely comprises older women, and whose block is currently under construction nearby, are usually well represented, but with much intermixing of groups and interconnections evident – the atmosphere is usually highly sociable, sometimes loud. The event had been frequently mentioned to me by LAiC members when I asked about what the group got up to informally, perhaps keen to emphasize

both their neighbourhood attachment and the social life of the estate which might not be apparent from initial impressions of such locations.

I began to attend most weeks, primarily as a chance to chat with LAiC members in a different environment, and share a little more of their lives. Each week I would generally meet one or two members, but sometimes no-one from the group would be there. This surprised me: I had assumed it would be an ideal place for the group either to meet with other locals, or as an alternative to their own common apartment, given the group's complaints about the difficulty of their own space as a place to meet informally. Sound reasons were given: the food (admittedly of variable quality); the lunch sitting did not fit with members' tastes and daily rhythms; the hall was noisy when busy, and thus hard to hold conversation easily (also true). Keen to involve myself as much as possible, I took a turn at lunch preparation along with the in-formation cohousing group, hoping that it would encourage LAiC members to come along together; I have experience in commercial baking and had made cake-based promises to LAiC on which I had mostly failed to deliver. Most of the LAiC members did indeed come, but arrived later than most others, ate, and left quickly. While most regular regulars tended to hang around for a chat, it was noticeable that by the time the lunch service was completed – and I had intended to catch up with the group – they had all left.

Of course LAiC are by definition themselves a form of social hub, so could be seen as having less need of the community centre than other residents on the estate, for whom it clearly played a stronger role. Yet I also detected a reticence about the whole idea on the part of LAiC members: although the project was not an age-related one, its attendees were largely older, and from brief chats with LAiC members as we walked sometimes down to the centre, I suspected many preferred not to be associated with what they felt was an activity which represented an image of ageing they themselves had rejected. It was telling that (away from the location) group members sometimes made jokey comments or criticisms of the regulars there, especially about what they referred to as 'the mafia': a boisterous group of older local residents who each week sat in the same positions at the same table, and who might be perceived as the epitome of a regular 'pensioner lunch group'.

LAiC's local engagement: concluding thoughts

The incident noted above may seem to contrast with the group's pride in their local engagement that began this section. But perhaps it underlines a difference: that being together as a group invites stereotyping as a group that is above all *old*, while involvement on a more individual basis perhaps makes it easier to engage as a person in their own right. This is somewhat speculative; but what is clearer is a temporal connection, that much of the local engagement that I discussed with the members was established several years ago but has now reduced somewhat, and in this context it is conceivable that the group no longer feels the need to engage so much on any front. Jill presents herself as less engaged than the rest of the group, but I sensed actually from conversation with others that her attitude was not so exceptional:

... after 40 years of social work, I didn't feel like socially engaging. I thought "I've done so much social work, I have other things to do now" I've already done some social engagement things, but I've not felt like other people in the group, who are really driven to do these things: "Next, I have to do this, or I want to do that..." I thought, "I've got it all behind me, I don't need it anymore." Good, that I've done it, but no... I want to relax a bit now. [Laughs]

As noted earlier, I do not think that the group's stepping back from such activity represents a stepping back from sociability or engagement for members more generally. Many, Beth for instance here, have re-focussed their energies elsewhere – a theme that will be explored through the rest of this chapter. But the manner of the gradual withdrawal from such 'purposeful' activity does seem to suggest that the members no longer feel a need to prove or demonstrate LAiC as an exemplar of a better later life; in doing so I wonder if something is also lost in terms of the otherwise strong identity that has bound the group together.

7.3 Learning from individual members' relationships outside the group

Changing priorities

The last section focussed primarily on a commitment made by the group to local activity and individuals' involvement in local projects and so on. In exploring this theme, it also became apparent that such activity seems to have some extent ebbed in recent times. As also noted, LAiC's group social activity together was also less than I had assumed (or had been presented to me). The group's original aim is important here: the intention was to be a close community, not simply to combat loneliness but to enjoy and value the '*stimulus of community life*', expressed in terms that implied almost an extended family. It seems the group has allowed itself to drift from this mutual commitment over the years, even though the potential need to support each other becomes ever greater.

Some, like Wendy, seemed not even to be in agreement with the overall aims any longer, linking what she perceived as the social dissipation of the group and the likelihood of mutual support as we talked about some of the specific aims in the flyer:

Yes, that is a lovely text, but it has nothing to do with the reality of the group. Or not much. Things were maybe [like that] at the beginning, but ... There is not such a great strong connection in the group – there's still some connection, but not so... No, it's not like that anymore! [laughs] No. It's embarrassing, I think.

And although with advancing age doubtless comes a stepping down in energy levels, this did not seem to be at the root of the issue. It had become apparent very early during my fieldwork that members' day-to-day lives were far less centred on LAiC than I had anticipated. Instead, it seemed that there was an interplay and negotiation of demands on each of the members on them from elsewhere. On one hand this might have had a dissipating effect on LAiC as a coherent 'unit', and is discussed later in the context of family relationships. But I also found discussion with members about their friendships outside the group shed more light on the nature of the group's social framework itself. While simply asking '*what does LAiC mean to you*' elicited little response – or answers that sounded suspiciously like quotes from the flyer –

asking members to compare what the group meant to them in comparison with *other* relationships was far more fruitful, and paradoxically resulted in a stronger sense of what the group really is in terms of social mutual care and reciprocity.

Close friendships beyond the group, as *defining* the group

As I began to explore these relationships with individual members it became increasingly clear that there was no single 'typical' situation, that each person has negotiated their own balance and through this their own position on the importance (or otherwise) of the group to them.

Wendy moved from southern Germany around a decade ago, a year or so before she moved into the group. She emphasized to me the importance of her lifelong friendships, most of whom remain in the area in which she grew up, describing how the co-operative communities in which she's always lived were '*really always more important than family*' (i.e. than her parents and siblings). As noted above, asking members to compare relationships often drew more productive outcomes, especially when I was more provocative, stating an untenable position with statements such as '*surely LAiC friendships take precedence over others?*' Although on one hand Wendy had admitted that LAiC has meaning for her in terms of friendship connection – in particular the chance to share a 'same generational' friendship bond (see Chapter 6) – she was surprised when I asked her to compare these two parts of her life, which she regarded as separate:

... there is a friendly relationship, but it's not so close – not as tight as with my family, and not as close as to friends outside LAiC. These [friends] are people who I've known a lot longer than the LAiCs, I've known them for 40 years or so. Obviously it's completely different!

Yet she had moved to Berlin, independently of either friends or family (her daughter and two grandchildren also live elsewhere in Germany), and while she obviously found this hard, clearly she sees LAiC as being able to take on the role of 'looking out for her' in their place:

When I said I was going to Berlin, they all said, “You're joking, you can't go to Berlin now, your whole social world is here.” I had a lot of really good friends there – and still have them – who couldn't imagine me going anywhere where I hardly know a soul. In the beginning, everyone was pretty angry. Every week someone else came [to Berlin] to have a look, at least while I lived in [first apartment in Berlin]. But when they heard about LAiC, they thought, “Well, she's not so alone then.” They were all worried that I would get lonely here. That wasn't the case! [Laughs]

Jill, who also moved to Berlin and LAiC from another part of the country, seems to put much less emphasis on previous friendships however, seeing it rather as a kind of ‘reset’ in her life, a new friendship base that she might then expand out from:

...and that's also an advantage of a group. You are new [to a place] and you're already intertwined with others. So there's not so great a need to move around [socially] as if you'd come to the city alone. [...] I already had family in Berlin – cousins and aunts – that was still an area of contact, plus other people I've slowly started to get to know. What comes, comes. I haven't built up the social network I had in [city] before. When you go to work, you get other social benefits. [...] I still have quite a lot of contact with old friends, outside of Berlin. More than here. Here in Berlin the group has it covered really, for me. It was just so easy, to have a structure like this, when you come back to such a big city.

Others expected even more from the group, hoping – as noted in Chapter 5 – for the group to play a primary role in their lives. Pauline moved to Berlin largely to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren, but her close friends are spread around Germany with very few in Berlin. She had expected LAiC to provide her most important friendship relationships, and although admitting to being ‘too lazy’ to have made new friendships since moving to Berlin, she is clearly very disappointed:

If this is just a leisure group, then I could choose another [kind of] leisure group – one where you go for walks, or to see films... if this doesn't go beyond that, then... If it's just about leisure activities, filling some time pleasantly, then that's not enough for me. I need friends here in Berlin. Mine are too far away. I'm so often away there, then here, travelling back and forth at weekends. But I can't keep on driving forever! They're just too spread out, everywhere!

Others seem happy enough between the balance between the group and their lives beyond it, having developed lower expectations perhaps, or having less interest or need in the group than they had expected. For Rosie, it is clear that much of her life lies outside the group and is largely focussed on her own children and extended family, nieces and nephews etc.; when we first met at her flat, she was keen to show me a wall of her main living space on which she had numerous photos of various family groupings, explaining each in detail. She spends a lot of her time at a place in the countryside near Berlin where her family keep horses²⁴, and where she's long been involved with her own gardening project. On one hand she acknowledges that membership of LAiC is valuable to her, in some ways like family, saying: *'I've lost my own three brothers already – and I sometimes say, "[Roger], you're like a brother to me!" [laughs] and John too.'* But she also sheds light on the subtler distinctions around the social role of the group. In an interview just after her birthday, her description of how the group celebrates each member's birthday was revealing of the relationship for her between LAiC and others who are important to her. It is a feature of LAiC's community that every member's birthday is marked in some way, and for her:

The group came round to mine in the morning to sing [birthday wishes]. I offered everyone a glass of sparkling wine – we all sat and chatted. I brought some fruit, little snacks, and other things. It was nice... Then they left. And that left the rest of the day – well the evening – for friends and family.

When I pursued this thread with her, of 'friends' separate from the group, she explained how:

I don't feel I have to be intimately connected with anyone, or do everything with them [in the group]. Anyway, I'm too free-spirited and independent. And it's good, I think, that the whole group has learned this from each other a bit too. That it doesn't have to be like that. It's important that everyone has their own independent lives, no relational constraints. [pauses, thinking at length...] [...] ... LAiC does me good because it gives me a sense of belonging. I am a LAiC, we

²⁴ This is not to imply that Rosie's family is particularly wealthy (and certainly not Rosie herself, who rents one of the smallest flats of the group). Ownership or renting of land outside Berlin is not a signifier of significant wealth in a way it might be in, say, the southeast of England.

are a community. Obviously, one can define community differently, but we define community as based... as a *framework*, there to use, but, we also have a private life. And those [two] things are... completely different, completely separate kinds of needs.

As noted in the last chapter though, for some in the group there are close friendships within the group they value more than this slightly reductive idea of a framework or a kind of social backstop suggests. Wendy explained how proximity had been an important element in her friendships within the group, people she could easily go for a drink or to the cinema with, who were available in this way. But if this seems trivial, Judith framed that same sociability in a way that suggested something subtler in friendship terms but very important in the context of LAiC's aspiration that its members care for each other. She described her own stronger friendships in the group, as compared to others, in this way:

I can get in touch, and see someone intensely²⁵, or not at all – I don't have to. In theory I could do the same with friends outside the group, but is there a *basis* there? ... And I find, I have a few girlfriends, and I have some [degree of] contact with a lot of people, but for the people here there is... a *willingness*. And so, if I feel like it, I can go immediately and get support.

What she meant by a 'willingness', she went on to explain, is a kind of social contract between members, a kind of agreed equality that is absent in other friendships. It may not exist between all of the members, but is a hint at the kind of relationships that may perhaps support more intensive mutual support in the future, and indeed have already begun to come in to play in some ways (as explored in Chapter 8).

On the other hand, this willingness did not exist equally for every group member. As noted above, Pauline feels she has never found the social support and connections through the group that she had hoped for. Amanda is the other member who also clearly felt some degree of disillusion with and dislocation from the group, a major element of this being due to the advent

²⁵ The literal translation was 'to have intensive care' with the person.

of grandchildren, discussed later. In contrast with Pauline however, she has strong friendships elsewhere largely linked to her political activity. But she confided to me on more than one occasion that she sometimes wonders what the group actually offers that adds to her busy social life elsewhere:

Since I also do many other things, LAiC takes a back seat these days. I don't belong really – there is a core and others that are more like planets [laughs].

Exploring members' thoughts about their close friendships outside LAiC has revealed often complex relationships, that differ for each member and are expressed ambivalently, but begin to hint at the identity of the group for its members, and also its future potential. Of course other longer established relationships (and also including family bonds, as discussed later) will always take precedence in some ways. It could be argued that the close-knit group suggested by the flyer has not been maintained in the long run.

Yet perhaps the value of the 'framework' that has emerged, a secure base for members from which to live other lives, should not be underestimated. On one hand it offers a close proximity, an availability of human contact that is not often available through other established friendships. I joked with some of the members after learning from Rosie about the group's tradition of making sure everyone received a group visit in some form on their birthdays; while the manifesto states that *'It should never be that a sudden illness goes unnoticed...'*, perhaps it would be as accurate to include that *'It should never be that a birthday goes uncelebrated'*. Judith went further, suggesting that for her (and, she implied, one or two other members) there was something more: a kind of equality of relationship, an understanding of need, that was unique to LAiC in her life.

7.4 Relationships with children, and the new paradigm of grandchildren

When I asked individuals about relationships with their own children and the group, the dominant response – especially from those who do not have family nearby – was how members' children felt comforted that their parents were 'being cared for', that someone was looking out for them day-to-day. It was also one of the rare themes of the flyer that the members actively referred to, i.e. *'...take the burden off relatives, who ... have the certainty*

that we are actively involved in a reliable community.' Usually such references were generalised, without a specific response to health issues. Pauline for instance mentioned to me that:

My kids think it's good [LAIc] because I live alone. There's no longer a partner around, I'm alone in this apartment. So they know it's good I'm not alone because the group is there.

Wendy however has been seriously ill (with cancer) in recent years, and also underwent a hip replacement operation during my fieldwork period. As noted in the previous chapter, she has a daughter and two grandchildren who live on the other side of Germany and struggled with making the choice not to live close by them. She clearly still struggles with the situation, primarily she says because she is not able to support her grandchild while her daughter and son-in-law work. According to her, Wendy's daughter was also concerned about her mother being far away:

... yes, she worries quite a bit. She always feels very responsible, especially since I was ill. She always treats me like a raw egg²⁶. Not that she thinks "Oh, I have to care a lot about my mother because she doesn't know anyone here." She knows me – actually she knows that it doesn't have to be like that, and that I always get to know people. But ... I *do* think about it, but there's no point really. I'm here. [Laughs] It became clear to me that those kind of worries are a strain on the family. I didn't want any of that, and LAiC came as a stroke of luck.

There is certainly some truth in the fact that while the members remain relatively independent and relatively physically able: LAiC has indeed been able to 'lift the burden' from relatives. Issues around declining health and illness are dealt with in the next chapter, but in this context I sensed the members were speaking more of an emotional independence, of not having the emotional worries or the ties that exist in both directions between parents and children, and which allowed group members to continue to pursue independent lives in a broader sense. In fact it is less about lifting the burden from members' children as it is freeing the members to live their lives: Roger's comment that LAiC would reject any attempt by someone's children to

²⁶ Colloquial phrase, 'to be treated delicately'.

place their parent with the group in order to be supported and avoid isolation is not a contradiction of this concept. Rather, it reinforces the urge to be independent: what is key is that the LAiC members have chosen for themselves to be in the group, and who they will support. To be 'sent' somewhere by one's children represents an act of passivity, of loss of control.

There does remain a fear hinted at that the group may ultimately not be capable of such support though. Beth, normally very thoughtful in conversation, seemed oddly short, flippant even, in response to my question of what her own daughter thought of the group:

Oh, not much really [i.e. no strong view]. Our flyer states – did you see it? – that we lift the burden from our relatives, because they know, that we're out of the way²⁷. For my daughter, it wasn't an issue, as there's no problem, I'm quite fit, therefore she doesn't need to feel grateful. I think it's important for her that I'm in good health, but otherwise she's so busy with her family that she doesn't really think about it in that way.

Beth's tone when she said this was light-hearted, meant as a quip rather than seeking to paint her daughter in a negative light. But it came toward the end of a lengthy conversation where she had talked quite deeply and honestly about fears of failing health and the future, and in which she had talked neutrally (i.e. in the third person) about whether it would be right for 'one' to resist family taking on a caring role, and implied she did not see the group as being able to fulfil that role in her life. Yet for Wendy, LAiC has done exactly that; she *has* been successful so far in not needing the support of her daughter. Furthermore, she and others have at the same time been able to demonstrate their independence by supporting their *children*, primarily through helping out with grandchildren. In fact when I talked to Wendy about whether her daughter worried about her (noted above), and whether she would consider moving closer (and thus leave LAiC) the conversation moved to the support she was able to give:

²⁷ 'Aufgehoben', lit. 'suspended or voided', a quite negative connotation for an apparently light-hearted comment.

I've looked at what's happening there [in cohousing], because my daughter lives in Cologne. I don't see my grandson so often, about five times a year, because my daughter works. Of course there is the possibility that I could move to Cologne, to support them – he's now in kindergarten and is always ill, in early days like that the kids get constantly re-infected with everything that goes round. My daughter and her boyfriend always have to work out who can stay at home because both work. So I looked at what residential groups there are in Cologne, and there are some already, yes. But I don't know anyone else in Cologne.

In fact, the topic of grandchildren was a major theme when I asked about relationships between members and their children. The recent arrival of grandchildren came as something of a surprise to LAiC. At the time of the fieldwork, there were a total of thirteen, all of whom have arrived in the last four years, and to the children of eight members of the group. As Roger put it:

The grandmothers have all become grannies very late. Their daughters were already 40 when they had the first baby – then of course by that time the grandmas are already in their 70s. That's a big difference between a 20-year-old and a 40-year-old mother, [and then] a grandmother. There's been a lot of: "Thank God, *finally* I have a grandchild!"

In addition, most of the grandchildren are to families living in Berlin, so feature prominently in the lives of many of the members; the arrival of grandchildren has been a significant event in the social life of LAiC, and was one of the first strong themes in conversation that I noticed early in my fieldwork. Much of this felt very positive, and for quite a long period seemed to me uncontested as part of the group's life. The presence of grandchildren has to some extent encouraged the idea of an 'extended group' that encompasses the families of its members; Several of the group members' children have come to know each other quite well. Wendy describes, for instance, how:

Beth has a granddaughter who always says that I am also her "grandma". We have a lot of close contact because she lives in Berlin. So she now has two "grandmas" here!

Some of the children have reportedly joined LAiC Christmas and Easter celebrations, and individually are often around – I met two members' children (and grandchildren) myself on odd occasions when meeting LAiC members for lunch. Some have even holidayed together as a group with multiple grandchildren. Beth described to me how on one occasion she played host in her apartment to nearly all of the group's children and grandchildren, something remembered fondly by several others in the group.

For those with grandchildren, it is clear that such plans and events have been welcomed. In fact more than one member expressed disappointment that the LAiC 'family' has not been extended more in this way. Part of this, they accepted, is geographical: the grandchildren of three of the members are not in Berlin. But some hinted to me that one member without grandchildren made it awkward for LAiC as a group to more openly embrace the extended family idea, saying they '*often had to steer clear of the subject*' when she is around. Others mentioned another member whose children and grandchildren are notably less connected to the group socially (most having never met them) and were quite critical of this. Yet such attitudes seem to deny the fact that for several members of the group, the subject of grandchildren is a quite exclusionary one. Amanda, as noted earlier, already feels that the group is more peripheral to her than for others. Although she has no immediate plans to leave LAiC, the issue of grandchildren has made her increasingly ambivalent:

I'm the only one who is not a grandmother. Except for John and Roger. And Janet. Although she does have a son. Because we're all older, I never expected that we'd all of us get little grandchildren! This is unusual because everyone was late-bearing. At my age, they suddenly have little grandchildren – which is nice. But it's also an important thing in the group. *Of course* the family always comes first! The grandchildren and so on ... Sometimes I feel marginal, with my interests. Sometimes I feel sad or angry about it. Then I think, "Is this the right place for me?" That's the way it is.

Roger spoke at length when I asked him about the subject, and raised it again on other occasions. For him it was clearly a major issue in terms of the group's life together:

You can't talk about grandchildren with grandmas! [we both laugh] Those who do not have grandchildren – Amanda, John and me and all of us, we experience that differently than grandmothers. When the pictures go around: [exaggerated sweet tone] "Oh! Did you see? Our little Frieda ..." - I'm not interested in that! But the grandmas of course: [in sweet tones again] "Oh, yes! Beautiful! How sweet! What has she got up to today?" It's not been talked about as a problem. At least John got everyone to agree that a lot has changed through the grandchildren. But it was never discussed that we would have to change as a group or something. You can't discuss that either!

Perhaps more important than Roger's dislike of such 'baby talk', is his concern that there is a more serious negative impact on the group, that the arrival of grandchildren has diverted members' attention elsewhere. On one occasion, in the context of discussing the group's involvement in the local neighbourhood, he complained that:

... nowadays many say, "I have to go home, my daughter has an appointment today, I have to pick up the grandchildren from kindergarten!" A lot has changed because of the grandchildren! [...] "So I have to travel to [city], my daughter is there, to take care of the grandchild." As a result, a lot has changed! It used to be more like: "We live in the neighbourhood now, we have to go out, do something with the school helpers", and so on. Now everyone is more focused on their families, more inward looking. [...] It doesn't help the group life! Because everything goes out. In the beginning, when we were just a smaller group, we knew Jill's daughter, Wendy's daughter, Janet's son and so on. They'd come along to Christmas parties. But the new ones, the children of Beth and Rosie and so on, are all so far away! They also have no desire or no interest in getting to know us! They should be glad that their mother is in a group, [laughs] that they do not have to look after them! But that's – we just always hear about them, they're always around, but they're not part of the group.

Without being with each of the members every day, it was difficult to say just how dominant grandchildren were in terms of actual time for those that were involved with them. Some were able to give me diary summaries, or run through their typical week with me. It was clear that several in the group picked their grandchildren up from school several times a week: Pauline looks after hers two days per week; Jill, whose family lives an hour or so from Berlin by train visits them weekly – or they come to her. Wendy, whose daughter and two young

grandchildren live further away still, was often away staying with them for extended periods over the summer while I was doing my fieldwork.

Several members mentioned that they were always 'on call' in case of emergencies, and in fact other members with grandchildren not in Berlin had strong regrets at not being able to do that. Judith explained, when asked whether it was difficult to plan time between family and the group, seemed surprised at the question. She did not feel any particular tension, because to her the priority seemed obvious:

No [emphatic]. Children have priority I guess, or grandchildren. So if I have a LAiC date, and my son or daughter call and it's an emergency, then I always say "yes I can". And I'll say "sorry LAiC, but I have to rush". But usually it works out, so I have free days.

Occasional dissatisfaction was hinted at: one Friday evening on the train returning to Berlin after a day out that had left us all tired, Beth said to me how she was feeling cheerful at '*a whole weekend without grandchildren*'. When I followed this up with her later, she claimed I had misunderstood, that there was no tension or problem: that for her and others in the group weekends were always 'grandchild free'. Nonetheless, it did suggest that they took up considerable time through the rest of the week.

The possibility did occur to me that to some extent such support is as much a demonstration of 'being busy', as much as it is actual support work. Helping with grandchildren often seemed to comprise a large part of busy daily schedules that came up in conversation, bumping into members on the street, or most often when I tried to make individual appointments, with a typical comment being of the kind: '*3pm is fine next Wednesday, but I have to pick up my grandson from nursery at 4*'. For some, it seemed clear that although their support was valued by their children, it also sometimes fitted with their own lives more than they admitted. In a discussion about whether she might join LAiC in their plans to go away for New Year, Tina for instance, relates how:

... the group is going, yes. But I won't be, as I've promised my daughter that I am always with her on New Year's Eve and take care of the child. I do not like New Year's Eve. I think it's terrible when everyone embraces and kisses at midnight ... Ugh! I have never liked that! Those couples who quarrel all the time [laughing] and then on New Year's Eve "Ohhh", everything's fine! No, I want to have my peace! It's just really nice to take care of my grandchild on New Year's Eve.

Yet overall it would be wrong to portray the support members' gave to their children in this way as a significant element in the negotiation of a third age identity. If anything, some like Roger seemed to feel that grandchildren represented for him a shift away from the 'third age project' of LAiC toward more traditionally defined roles that he was not anyway able to participate in. While not directly comparable, it was interesting that one member of Group Two in her 50s and working seemed actually to feel quite negatively about recently (and unexpectedly) becoming a grandmother, saying that it had happened too soon, and that she resented this for making her 'feel old'.

Of course, this particular aspect of LAiC's life together could be regarded as very specific to this one group, and for which I had no useful comparisons with other groups. In Group Two, there has been no such issue as many of the members are younger, but also the group did not have the coherence or sense of identity that LAiC has to begin with. Group One residents had quite a different relationship again, spending significant time with families elsewhere, or having their children (and occasionally grandchildren) use the apartments as a Berlin base, albeit the group as a whole has no real life together in the sense LAiC does. But what it does perhaps illustrate is that over many years changing external factors will inevitably have some impact on the social dynamic and coherence of a group; how it negotiates between those changes and the importance of the group remaining supportive of each other in some meaningful way is a key question.

7.5 Summary and discussion

I have explored in this chapter various ways in which members negotiate relationships and activity both as a group and as individuals, as a further perspective to help define what the group means to its members and where its real social value may lie.

As concluded in the previous chapter, although relationships with other immediate neighbours might have been considered key, the apparent absence of ‘strong bonds’ with neighbours that might compare with the other relationships within and without LAiC that are considered in this chapter is itself informative. While, it is clear that from an early stage LAiC has made a serious commitment to its aim of local engagement, and such activity might seem to respond to Putnam’s framing of the concept as related to civic engagement. It also chimes with the cohousing ethic not to be a gated community, and could also be argued that the group is employing an aspect of bridging capital in seeking control of its tenure arrangements through active membership of the local housing board.

But reflecting on my fieldwork period, I realise that at no point in the research did I consider this local engagement – LAiC’s work on the estate at least – as forming a significant part of members’ social networks or strong social ties. In practice, these are activities rather than relationships as building social bonds that might potentially be reciprocal or supportive; this was evidenced by the relative ease with which members were able to break the connections in favour of roles and relationships that were clearly found more emotionally fulfilling, and further evidenced by the social distance the group often displayed in relation to the local community centre.

The incremental withdrawal from local engagement activities might also be viewed through other lenses, and no doubt in part because some of it often involves physical work which members will find more challenging as time goes on. Continued investment of time in individual actions such as politics and work however suggests less connection to a withdrawal from activity in general, but more from performative activity as a *group*. Individual friendships within the group, and days out together do still continue, intermittently. But incidents such as Beth’s gardening story were usually framed by members with some variation of ‘*because I*

don't have to do this anymore', which raised the question of why any of the group felt they had to do such things in the first place. This suggests that the members saw such engagement as a demonstration of LAiC's identity to others, and that doing so is now much less of a priority: a third age project that is now given less priority as lives move on.

In terms of familial relationships, it seems that the group may be atypical in having more family members living nearby, and fewer members without children, than might be the case in senior cohousing groups generally. Yet relationships with children have been (thus far) supportive of those children rather than the other way around. In fact the idea of members 'not being a burden' on their children remains a strong one, although is not as straightforward as it seems: it is as much about releasing both parties from implicit commitments that in practice are difficult to fulfil. Wendy coped with her operation primarily through the support of the group, while she continues to live far from family and close friends (as will be discussed more fully in the next chapter). Thus, in referring back to the literature on the social support of older people considered in Chapter 2, LAiC's situation might be framed a conscious or intentional move further toward the trend of supportive non-kin, as an emotional wish to avoid burdening adult children.

And while the day-to-day support explored in Chapter 6 might be outwardly evidenced as largely instrumental (and which will be returned to in Chapter 8), 'emotional neighbouring' is by no means confined to relationships with family or friends outside the group. On one hand, some in the group presented LAiC merely a 'framework', albeit one that allowed for individual friendships and also a different kind of support: the idea of a 'willingness', an availability to each other based on an explicit commitment to each other for which there was often no equivalent in other relationships. And there was often evidence that suggested more than this: that the members did provide the 'personal/emotional' neighbouring that Glass (2016) considered in the context of senior cohousing groups.

Other friends and family are of course not excluded by the group as sources of emotional care. But while some do live relatively close, the LAiC social framework clearly offers an attraction that its members regard as continuing to have value as a guarantee of reciprocity and neighbourliness that is not uniformly present elsewhere.

Finally, there is a question of the new paradigm for the group of grandchildren. On one hand, it could be argued – for those with families very close by at least – that it has added to a sense of independence for group members, that not only are members not in need of support from their children, but they are able to *give* support through helping out with school runs and so on. On the other, the effect on the fellowship of the full group is more mixed. For many members, grandchildren represented the potential to bring the group closer, and a (blocked) opportunity to informally expand the group to achieve a more intergenerational ‘feel’ through actual family members with whom there were already close bonds. Roger in particular feels very strongly that most of the women have been lost to the more ‘traditional’ role of grandmother, with others such as Amanda regarding it as an additional reason to focus her life elsewhere beyond the group. The grandchild-free members of the group, especially Roger, give the impression of feeling let down, even excluded, from an essentially third age project which for them had taken an unexpected and unwelcome turn. Although not a question that I pursued, I also wondered whether the issue speaks to the underlying concerns by those without children about who might care for them in the coming years, if the other members have shifted their priorities in this way.

Perhaps it is the case that – as studies noted in Chapter 2 described – that the group’s role (as non-kin) and family role are able to co-exist, as complimentary rather than in competition. Clearly there is potential inequality though from a group point of view; while views in the group were mixed, it was telling that in the final weeks of my fieldwork, the monthly walking trip (which I was looking forward to as a last chance to chat to most of the group together) was cancelled, with nearly all the members citing family and childcare commitments.

Chapter 8: Health, decline, mutual support and succession



Image 7. LAiC walking trip, July 2017.

8.1 Introduction

The previous empirical chapters have focussed on the history of LAiC and primarily on aspects of its ‘everyday’ social dynamic, exploring how the group negotiates a life together, in the light of its own early ambitions. But the chapters could also be regarded as an exploration of a group of people attempting to lead ‘successful’ lives in post-retirement, negotiating a third age together. This chapter explores how the group is beginning to negotiate, or at least consider, the potential implications of a fourth age, i.e. how the group has begun to deal with increasing ill health and physiological decline among its members, and is planning for the future. Although the group remains in relatively good health, and the members will doubtless face greater challenges around these issues as the years progress, the decision to focus on a well-established group proved to be enlightening in exploring the negotiation of the ‘foothills’ of the fourth age.

It begins by depicting the positive aspects of LAiC’s existing mutual support and care around its members’ health issues. However, the chapter then continues by investigating how aspects of decline in later life – both current and potential – have sometimes been avoided in

discussion and action as a group, and thus how this might be interpreted as an obfuscation or avoidance of the group's original openly stated aims. It concludes by reflecting on the possible future of LAiC in terms of planning and delivery of mutual support, but also in terms of succession: specifically the challenges of finding new, younger members who might ensure the continuation of the group beyond its current membership. For both of these themes, the approach presented here is to try to go beyond 'straightforward' practical issues, to explore the underlying negotiations and resistances that might challenge the group's avowed aims.

The group has aged since its members first came together more than a decade ago. Although a majority of members joined more recently, those new arrivals have not necessarily been younger, and the 'group' age has continued to rise: members' ages (at the end of my fieldwork period in late 2017) spanned from 68 to 79, with an average of around 73. Inevitably, the number of illnesses, health shocks and chronic conditions has increased among the members. Some, such as a recent hip replacement operation, are routine and should result in improved mobility for that person. There are no cases of members requiring full-time care, or suffering significant loss of mobility or dementia – in short the conditions that might most strongly be perceived as entering into a fourth age. Thus LAiC has not 'arrived' at a fourth age state, but is increasingly confronted with the fourth age as an imaginary, to be contrasted against their existing status (as explored in Chapter 2). They are increasingly having to negotiate the 'dark material' of later life in the day-to-day lives of their members.

Although LAiC's original flyer includes a range of aspirations, it is on the themes of health, care and support that it is most specific, and, it could be argued, which underpin the most important of LAiC's ambitions: *to live a later life free of institutionalised care, achieved through mutual support*. The text is not reproduced here, but it is notable that while it speaks of independence – including the benefits to mental and physical health of avoiding loneliness, and that equally membership of the group will 'take the burden off relatives', there are also more strongly stated intentions around care. Although the reference to saving care and nursing costs through mutual assistance was removed from the text, perhaps the most unambiguous intent in the document remains, as:

We want, if necessary, to support each other even when someone becomes housebound temporarily or for a longer period. Following the motto of “Not alone and not in a home”, we want – if/when mutual support is not enough – to avoid institutional care if possible, with home-support-care services that we have chosen.

During my initial exploration of the themes of health and mutual care with individual group members, using the text from the flyer as a prompt, I found that beyond some ‘straightforward’ examples of care and support around particular incidents, responses tended to be somewhat superficial or vague, especially as I asked about the group’s future plans. While I suspected this was in part down to being put on the spot predominantly in interviews on issues that they felt were too private, I also suspected that the group also avoided these subjects with each other to a surprising degree. Thus although I begin this chapter by relating some of the positive examples of support directly told to me, I go on to consider whether and how such issues were discussed or dealt with by the whole group in other less formal ways: each other’s health in the present, practical planning for the future, and also around more nebulous concepts of the fourth age, of a more generalised fear of loss of agency. I conclude by considering the implications of these less conscious resistances and negotiations for senior cohousing groups more generally.

8.2 Successful mutual support and care

While much of this chapter attempts to dig deeper into the more complex attitudes around mutual care and the future of the group, it is important to acknowledge that in terms of the manifesto’s calls to look out for each other day-to-day, and to support each other in times of need LAiC functions very successfully for its members. Two examples of this are as follows.

‘Keeping an eye out’ for each other

For most of the group, living so proximately to each other has had clear advantages. One story told to me early on by several group members as an example was of how Alison’s downstairs neighbour (and now ex- group member) Jean had had an allergic shock, but had managed to alert Alison just before losing consciousness. As Rosie told it:

It seemed like we were all there in a few seconds. John measured her blood pressure, Alison did I-don't-know-what, I packed a bag and everything was there and she was OK when the emergency services arrived and she could go off to hospital. That's something that I think could work over and over.

I later learned from Alison that she had received the call, and finding her neighbour unconscious, had been able to administer emergency treatment (possible because of her own medical background). It seems probable that Jean might not have otherwise survived, given her inability to call the emergency services. The incident was not an age-related one, and to date there have not been any significant incidents such as falls that are considered to be linked to 'frailty', yet the incident seemed to have affected the group, and led to a greater sense of 'looking out for each other'. In fact, for some this has become a more formal thing, as Alison mentioned:

... we always get the message when someone's in a bad way. Sometimes, people die alone, and no-one has noticed, it's happened several times in this block already, and we avoid that. And we have a system where we check regularly, are the curtains closed, rules about looking from the inner courtyard.

The 'inner-courtyard curtain rule' operates as a semi-formal visual check – those with apartments facing on to the rear courtyard look out each morning check that that blinds or curtains have been opened, signifying that all is 'OK'. In fact, this arrangement works for some but not all members (not all overlook the courtyard), but most of the members *do* see other members as they come and go each day. Often the physical arrangement of the flats (beyond those who have the 'curtain check' mentioned above) encourages this: Jill's flat is above Alison's, so that their open balconies are 'stacked'; Alison's front door is directly opposite Clive's; most of the group share a staircase, and so on. Such regular but serendipitous contact also extends beyond the group. Jill's front door faces that of a friend of Alison's, for instance, and I noticed much interaction with the group and other neighbours as I came and went.

Roger, who with John lives a street away from the LAiC cluster in the ground floor of another apartment block, seemed keen to demonstrate how much he was in contact with all of his neighbours as they passed by his front garden one morning where we sat. But along with one or two members who lived in the main cluster, he was more ambivalent about a 'formal' checking system. When I asked whether there should be something that could work for all members (not just those overlooking each other's windows) Wendy signalled the views of several others in saying '*... I think that would be a bit much*'; in part this reflected a consensus among the group (previously noted) that the 'pepper-potting' arrangement of LAiC within the estate was agreed as less intrusive, less 'observed' than the almost-communal living of Group Two. Yet there was definitely a reticence among some members about being perceived as 'needing' to be checked on, despite the wording of the flyer that it '*...should never be that a sudden illness goes unnoticed and that there are serious consequences through lack of help*'. Several members were less keen to talk about the checking system and talked instead about the serendipity of being so close by, of not having to make the contact explicit.

Support when a member falls ill

'Keeping an eye out' as described above could be viewed as a benefit of the group that could be interpreted as simply an extension of good neighbourliness – and indeed for LAiC themselves there is a permeability at the edges of the group in these terms; Wendy, as previously noted, for instance has a (non-member) friend whose front doors is opposite, and '*often open, we're in and out*'. But the sense of the defined group is more strongly evident when a member has a serious illness, or for instance when Alison's husband died suddenly about two years ago: she described the support as invaluable, as having '*many shoulders to lean on*'.

Practical and emotional support of this kind has been of huge importance to the group in recent years to others as well. Jean, the former member, had a stay in hospital for which the members took turns to visit; Jill, who had a double hip replacement during the period of my fieldwork, also went through cancer treatment around three years ago (and is currently in remission). Jill's only child lives in another part of Germany with her own family, and close friends are also dispersed around different parts of the country, meaning that more than

others she has been reliant on the group through her periods in hospital. Although I asked the group if they would share their appointment diaries with me – and only received a very limited response overall – what I did receive shed light on some aspect of LAiC's existence that was not revealed to me through observation or interviews. Beth, who is clearly close to Jill, rather than sending me a list of appointments, sent me the personal thoughts she had recorded. She tells of Jill's admission to hospital for her hip replacement operation and subsequent visits (edited for the relevant items):

6. Nov

Very early in the morning, I accompanied Jill to the hospital. Maybe, they are operating on her as I'm writing this.

8. Nov

[...] went to cinema- "Sommerhäuser" and afterwards I received the whatsapp [message] I was longing for: [Jill] has survived the operation.

10. Nov

Two LAiCs went to see Jill on Wednesday. She is much better now. We are communicating per email and whatsapp to coordinate our visits. So I didn't go to the hospital, but to Decathlon [sports store] to buy warm gloves to protect my hands while cycling.

Thursday morning hospital again – Jill made her first steps.

Sunday morning: cleaning my flat, afternoon hospital again. Since Saturday, all the women of LAiC have been to see Jill. None of the men. John and Roger are visiting Roger's family, as is often the way. Where is Clive?

[...]

14. Nov

In the morning, like every Tuesday, Plenum. Jill is in the rehab [part of the hospital] – at the Plenum we discuss who will do visiting, who will drive there, rota things. Otherwise nothing earth-shattering.

28. Nov [onwards]

[further entries, Jill returns from hospital approximately a week later]

Roger (despite not visiting Jill) is keen when I talk to him about looking after each other, to emphasize the various different ways in which the group looks out for each other, and acts as a safety net:

[...] if someone has had an accident or some sudden illness and goes to hospital, we have keys for each other's flats. If you go into hospital you can say, *"Please go to my cupboard and get me my night clothes and my soap and things."* That's pretty clear for us. Everyone could go there. But for instance, Janet wouldn't ask me to go to her flat, so it's someone else, of course. But the possibility is there, someone at least for every person, and that's good, I think.

These rather sporadic examples of the group caring for each other, might risk making such instances sound insubstantial, or something that good neighbours and family might rally round for. But group support played-out in this way is not a small thing, especially when contrasted with how such incidents might have played out for someone living a much more isolated life, who may go without daily contact, or who has either limited contacts or no contacts close by who can offer help in this way. The existence of the group meant in Jill's case that she could be discharged from hospital earlier than would otherwise have been possible. And despite the critique set out in the previous chapter that suggested LAiC has become less coherent as a social group in recent years, I have no doubt from being in close proximity to the group over several months that a sense of security and wellbeing derives from 'having each other's backs' in the ways described above.

Yet there are hints at limits to such care, both in practical terms, and because each of the instances related to me were not in *themselves* examples of long-term decline or chronic conditions. One member was unusual in being quite candid about this, when I asked what might happen if someone became chronically ill:

But I guess when it's time ... it will be difficult! It's always the case that when someone is sick, we start with a lot of commitment from the group, but this is forgotten quite quickly. I know of at least one person, that they feel very lonely, if it's something really serious like a lung inflammation or something. In the first few days someone came and supplied them or brought them something to eat and so that was all good again, but that person was still not properly recovered. [laughs, uncomfortably?] So, there's not support like that between us forever, you can't keep on... [pauses]. I think if it's going to be continuous and over a long period of time, that's not LAiC. This needs to be done by someone else.

It seems fair to say that in times of need, there has been an immediate and supporting response, and this is not to be undervalued. But these examples are a response to relatively 'clear cut' situations usually with the promise of recovery; the rest of this chapter will explore how the group's attitude to illness, but also to longer-term decline, care, and future planning are more complex and equivocal.

8.3 The challenges of reciprocity, and the limits of mutual care

The challenge of reciprocity

Thus far, the examples given of how help and support from members in line with the group's aspirations around mutual care were presented by the group as unproblematic, even as a kind of 'mission accomplished' in terms of what the group could achieve in this sphere. Yet as I probed deeper, it became clear that beyond these relatively 'clear cut' examples – a planned hospital visit, or a sudden emergency like the incident with Jean, where it is hard to imagine any member refusing to give or accept support – the situation was more ambivalent. The most striking point raised by members with me in private was the difficulty many of the group have in *asking for* or *accepting* care in perhaps more prosaic, everyday situations. While much was made by members of 'keeping an eye out' for each other, i.e. of living up to the manifesto aspiration that '*no member should be ill and it go unnoticed*', other incidents call into question the value of such actions when there is individual resistance to the offered support. Alison for instance talked to me about this on several occasions, talking about what might be described as more day-to-day illness, albeit very significant:

Everybody is ready to help each other straight away. Now we're all going to visit Wendy in hospital of course [...]. But sometimes even asking for help is very, very difficult and impossible for most people [in the group]. Here's a good example: Jill upstairs [group member] is my nearest friend. Last year I had bad bronchitis, in bed with a fever, and a terrible cough. She came every day. She was also a nurse in her very first job, and of course, a mother and so on, always making me a chest wrap, everything to drink and take care of myself. But when *she* is sick: do you think I can do the same for her? No way! She says, "I don't need anything, I like to just creep around and manage on my own. Leave me alone please." This

year we had Tina and her pneumonia. Only her sister was allowed in there, of course.

Although Alison herself has clearly given much thought to the issue, she may not be immune from such a response: Wendy claims it is *Alison* who will not accept help in these situations; Jill mentions how '*Alison is always so effusive on these things, but then suddenly she can be "Go away!" [laughs]*'. It suggests that the problem might be even more intractable than Alison – as someone who felt she recognised such problems and was able to overcome them herself – suggests. In fact, nearly every member seemed to feel that they *would* be able to accept support during poor health, but that others did not. Beth, in describing how she too, unlike the others, was able to open herself to accepting help, notably gives an example of helplessness that is not particularly helpless, rather than choosing a more concrete example within the group:

I think some people are "proud", I'm not sure if that's the right word. But I have no problems with that [accepting care from other members]. If somebody in the metro gets up and says "Do you want to sit down?" – "Yes! I would like to! Thank you!" [we both laugh]. But some feel like "I don't want to be helpless" and "I don't want other people to help me". They feel as if they were obliged or had to give something back. And with the LAiCs... I don't know what's in their minds! I can't understand that. But I know that everybody in the group prefers to do the things on their own rather than to accept help or to seem very old and kaputt. [laughs]

Indeed, despite the good words, there was a tendency among most of the group to position themselves not so much as resisting help from others, but as not needing it. As Amanda says:

... some people in the group are very private about their own things [health problems]. Some have problems saying "I need help!" They try to withdraw, which is difficult, not helpful, to themselves. I'm lucky. I haven't been in a situation like this, and I don't know how I would react – whether I would really ask for help? Probably I would, yes.

It seems unlikely that so many of the group have been quite as 'lucky' as they claim, or that they all have tendencies to resist being cared for in a way that they feel everyone else does.

Despite this ‘displacement’ perception, Alison is thoughtful on the matter, but places it in a generational and wider cultural context:

... the most important task for [LAIc in] the future is to accept one's own weakness and need and not to hide that from each other. It's a really important thing, I hope you get this, it's *Bedürftigkeit*²⁸. Is that “neediness” in English, is that a word?

[Me: Maybe just “need”?]

... yes, we think that we're all here when we're not so fit and can support each other. But that's a whole difficult issue because we're the War generation or just Post-War, and you have to “do things alone”. You're meant to do things without help. It's everywhere, and I suppose also the generations who came after us. So it's a helplessness, a dependency – one has to learn to let go a bit, which is hard to do in practice. We don't always succeed.

And ironically, given that it was an incident with Tina that most of the group seemed to refer to as an example of an inability to accept help, it was also Tina who sees that she needs to change:

I think we all still have a lot to learn in this group! I realise that I have to change. I prefer my peace and I'm very *grantig* [grumpy, in regional dialect] when I'm sick. [Me: *Grantig*?] ...it means a bad mood. They understand the word in the group now, for sure! Two years ago, I think, I felt very bad. I did not want to see anyone. The comrade [close friend from local politics] that I talked about earlier – dropped by, saw me and said: “You need to go to the doctor right now!” And it turned out I had severe pneumonia. I got infusions, antibiotics and I don't know what else. Since then LAiC knows that they cannot leave me alone! That they have to come when I feel bad – otherwise I will not move. I sit and think, “Now I want to die. End of. Out!” It's nonsense of course, when I'm well, I know it's all nonsense!

²⁸ Translates as ‘neediness’ but in this context ‘need’ is closest, in the sense of mutual reliance.

Yet despite this potentially positive reflection, I felt that there was a paradox at work in the group around these issues. On one hand, mutual support and care are a central aspiration for LAiC. On the other hand, almost by definition an intentional community such as LAiC consists of people who, in showing such an impressive pragmatism in planning for their later lives, demonstrate a degree of independence that might also make them those *least* likely to find accepting help easy. Alison says something interesting that highlights this contradiction, as expressing her strength and experience even in the context of demonstrating weakness:

That's our main thing as LAiC, that we have to keep an eye on. We are getting older and we are getting weaker. And we will need more [support]. And we have to admit that! I think that I can do that, because of my experience with helping [others] with self-awareness and being aware of others' needs [she continues to work part-time as an addiction therapist]. I know I can! I did that when my husband died. I called Beth and said, "I'm feeling really bad, can you come?" She came and slept [over] with me.

Ultimately, I suspect that LAiC's members will not be alone in struggling to accept the kind of support from others that they are otherwise willing to give.

An unequal mutual care?

It should also be acknowledged, that in addition to this 'general' ambivalence around issues of mutual support, there are also different factors that point toward a potential imbalance in the extent group members find they might be willing to give or receive care. Wendy hints at this, when she says:

It's really the case now that the community exists in the moment when it needs someone – like for care, or care in the case of illness. Or... when Alison's husband died, we looked up to see that we were taking care of her. Otherwise, relationships are more between individuals. But I don't want to undervalue that. That's how it is, and it's good.

Beth goes further, inadvertently, through an equivocal response where she seems to link reciprocity with close friendship. I asked her about the day-to-day help, if someone had a chronic condition that required help from others in the group indefinitely:

.... Other things, less major things, it depends on how much you like somebody, how much time you will give to them. Because, just a feeling I've got... [pauses, thinking] I think I would accept it and it's no difference if it's friends of mine or LAiCs. LAiCs are my friends! Some more, some less, but I have nothing against any of them. I don't think, "Ugh! This person should change and I don't want her in the group!" I accept them all, I like them all. But there are some I like more. They are really *friends* friends, really intimate friends. And I know they would care. I would care for them. Sure!

A significant element in the depth of friendship is obviously the amount of time with the group, the degree of trust built up over many years between members, that exists much less with relative newcomers. As Alison admits: *'After ten years, you just know, you can count on people! You have experienced this so often that you no longer have to doubt it.'* But she did not comment on how this might apply to those who came later. Most notable is Clive, jointly the most recent joiner, and also someone suffering a major health issue. There had been significant tension when members of the group had assumed Clive would expect care for his (ongoing cancer) condition. In fairness, Clive himself had no such expectation, but the instance is complicated for a number of reasons, not least that Clive felt (with some evidence) that the predominantly female group sided with (his partner) Judith and against him. And, of course, it was never LAiC's intention to provide significant care (and certainly not medical care) in this way to any member.

Having said this, it is clear that, as with Jill's case, the group might extend more care to a member who has been part of the group over many years, who has 'earned' their support; Roger commented to me obliquely one day (not speaking directly of Clive) that 'a person' could not simply join and immediately be a recipient of the group's assistance. But it does raise the question at an extreme case of how the varying degrees of integration of individual members to a group might affect the reciprocity of care and support.

No group will ever be comprised of individuals who all have the same relationship with each other, equal needs, or equal capacity to support. But there is also a particular dynamic that is different in the context of health and support around singles and couples. It was certainly notable that while Jill's needs were accepted by the group, and vice versa, Roger (by several accounts) rejected visits or offers of support from the group, which he brushed off to me by saying it was not necessary, and in any event John was available for anything that he needed. And as Tina notes:

You have to see how each individual reacts when something is really going on. As I said – Alison's husband was very ill... but Alison was there for him. Roger and John are a couple, there for each other. With the rest of us, it's different, it would depend on the individual, how one might react.

Finally, there is the question of what balance or negotiation might be reached with family members given LAiC's aspiration to '*take the burden off relatives*'. The advantage for Jill, whose children were not close by during her illness, has been clear. But notably, the wish not to rely on relatives (generally meaning children) was framed by members not as something done out of necessity, but out of a wish for independence. Rosie was clear in stating this as a major attraction to the group, even though she is very close to her family both geographically and emotionally:

And then, when I moved back to Berlin, it became clear to me, that that's a strain on the family. They [her children] are worried about it – what happens if I get ill? Or would I have to take care of myself? And I didn't want any of that, and it was clear that I already had the answer for myself. And LAiC came as a stroke of luck.

Given the reticence or vagueness around issues of future care by the group, I was surprised by how clear most members were on this one aspect of the flyer. At this stage it is difficult to see how such issues might unfold in the future, but I wonder about the disparity between members who have children – and who might wish or even insist on taking a role in their parent's care needs – and those without children. Ironically, of the three with no children, John and Roger (or Roger at least) seemed thus far the most resistant to accepting support from others.

Summary

The whole issue of how care might be given (and received) in future within the group as health issues become both more prominent and more chronic is something that in terms of observation was beyond the limit of my fieldwork. However, while it is perhaps possible that the group might in future rally round each member according to need, there are already hints that in practice this might prove difficult to achieve. On one hand, there is a paradox that while most of the group seem willing to give their support, it is entirely more difficult to be the supplicant, and this is perhaps more pronounced among the kind of people who have chosen such a strong, independent housing pathway for later life. Further, there are hints of potential inequalities stemming from several imbalances in the group: the strength of individual friendships, the differing commitment to care (as Beth noted ‘None of the men’ visited Jill), or the role of family members for those that have them. The latter seems to present a particular question mark given the extent (as explored in the previous chapter) that many members have refocussed away from the group and more toward family ties in recent years.

Further, I felt that the group thus far has been able to treat the various health issues as isolated incidents, and avoided thinking about the longer-term potential needs, and there was a limited response to my direct questions about this. The next section will look more deeply at other ways through which I might better understand how – at least as a group – LAiC has in different ways avoided or negotiated the subject of ageing decline.

8.4 Health, illness and potential decline: talking and behaving

The previous sections have perhaps already implied a reticence by most members when invited to talk in depth about their approach to some of the health issues implicit in ageing together, or planning for them; when I asked questions about the limits of caring for each other in the longer term, or plans for the organisation of care by others, I received at best a vague affirmative response, at worst a distancing from the aims of the flyer altogether.

I considered early on whether this was in part a response to my approach, putting individuals on the spot? It was often difficult to ask individuals about health and decline, which is after all a deeply personal subject that people might not always confide in their closest friends, let alone a stranger and researcher. A few members of the group did take the opportunity of our one-to-one conversations as a chance to talk about issues that they would *not* share in the group. But others were clearly very uncomfortable engaging with the topic with me to varying degrees. Other possibilities also began to suggest themselves at an early stage of my fieldwork: that perhaps later arrivals in the group felt less bound by or committed to the principles in the manifesto; or the partial social dissipation of the group in recent times might have also allowed a dissipation of the group's commitment to these principles – both as evidenced in previous chapters.

These themes shaped my way of thinking about how LAiC negotiated issues of health, illness and decline in later life, that are explored throughout the rest of this chapter. I hoped that the more ethnographic approach that I was taking in parallel to the interviews would help me pursue this further: for instance, whether such things were discussed or approached in other ways. Or alternatively, the ways in which discussing the implications of ageing and the need to care seriously for each other was avoided, and thus (it could be assumed) not actually addressed. The sections below draw more heavily on everyday conversation and behaviour; observation on the group's regular days out together was particularly fruitful, as it provided rare chances to experience all of the group – or at least a large part of it – interacting together and with others. In addition, I would sometimes be able to catch individuals in unguarded moments or in an unstructured context on days where we would sometimes spend up to ten

hours together, walking, talking, having lunch and so on. Such days also provided material that I was able to follow up in interviews, or in less formal situations with one or two members.

Making light of potential illness and decline

One initially striking aspect of LAiC was their self-awareness as a group – an acknowledgement when out together of how they might appear to other, younger people, in terms of an ‘old age’ stereotype. On occasions such as being out on a walking day together, issues of age and decline would sometimes be present, but almost always in a light-hearted context; the group members often on occasion played up to an image of ‘dodderly old people’. One instance early on one day out was sparked by someone failing to hear the group’s agreement to meet later at a certain time and location, asking loudly for the details as if those details had not just been spelled out. This became a running joke – often within ear shot of other park visitors – with different members of the group repeating the question after a suitably comic pause.

Such incidents played up to a certain stereotype of age, on one level an enjoyable act of camaraderie. But they did (understandably) hang on the relatively minor vicissitudes of ageing – forgetfulness, hearing loss and so on. There were not jokes about actual dementia or serious illness for instance, and the humour was usually generalised, rarely specific to an individual’s health. At one point early on in my field work I *had* briefly been given a different impression: on the first full day out that I spent with the group, I chatted mainly to John as we headed out to a town to the East of Berlin by train; he had been my first point of contact with the group prior to my field work proper, and at that point continued to play a role of ‘explainer’ and guide to LAiC. I had had difficulty sitting down on the train due to a knee injury I had sustained in a minor cycling accident, and explained this to John, joking that I was the least ambulant person in the group and worrying that I might not be able to go the full distance that day. This prompted John to relate how the LAiC members often found themselves in light-hearted competition in terms of health complaints and chronic conditions, along the lines of: *‘never mind about your arthritis, have I mentioned how I hurt my back the other day?’*

At the time I took John's story at face value, yet reflecting on my notes weeks later I noticed that – in my experience at least – small talk of any kind around health issues was very rare, and a couple of the group in later interviews strongly denied what John had suggested. I wondered if perhaps this was more an impression John had wished to give to someone still very much an outsider, of a group more comfortable with their own individual ageing than perhaps was really the case, and a continuation of the rosy, 'on message' description of the group he had given me at our original meeting. Of course, it is impossible that age-related issues of health are not shared at all, and as Beth described to me:

We sometimes talk about the fact that we don't hear very well any more. That's a theme these days... but it always has been really. We're always saying "what, I didn't catch that", but we talk about it and it's funny. And the other thing is "Oh! I can't see, I need new glasses." We do talk about getting older, yes, we don't ignore that, but not in a way that's "Ugh! I went to the doctor and the doctor said blah blah blah..."

In fact, Beth was being slightly disingenuous here; it was true that there was light-hearted talk around such issues, but there was overall a complex negotiation – largely an avoidance – of actual 'health talk' or 'illness chat' as several of the group referred to it, and which will be explored below. I began to get an impression from the kind of data discussed so far that there was a reticence around health issues which was at odds with the frankness or openness perhaps implied by the flyer. Obviously my experience of the group and what they discussed was only a snapshot, and one where they were aware of my presence. I did consider that group discussions around the essentially private matters of health might be discussed much more when I was not present, especially as I tended to be around for trips and other occasions aimed at enjoyment rather than serious reflection. But further observation and discussions with individuals, as discussed in the following sections, continued to add raise questions around the challenge of this theme for the group.

De-contextualising specific health incidents

While it is possible perhaps to make light of generalised, or stereotypical dimensions of ageing, it is of course impossible for the group to ignore some of the bigger individual health issues that have occurred, and indeed respond to them in supportive ways that have been previously discussed. But I detected that such incidents were, to a greater degree, 'ringfenced' from being considered as part of a pattern or narrative of ageing and decline, instead as one-off incidents less linked to ageing. The most notable example was Roger's back injury – sustained just prior to the start of my fieldwork, operated on, but then requiring Roger to return to hospital for a further operation caused – so others in the group alleged – by excessive sporting activity that went against medical advice to take care in recovery. In the end, this prolonged recovery ran through the whole of my fieldwork, hence Roger was unable to join us on any of the days out or any activities that involved walking any distance. His absence meant his situation was often the theme of conversations (or, at least offered a way for me to begin conversations by asking after his health) but discussion was almost always situated firmly by those responding within a context of Roger being prone to 'overdoing things' and never looking after himself; his slow recovery was never placed in the context of ageing (albeit at 67 he was the youngest member). Roger himself was keen to emphasize to me (on more than one occasion) how he was keen to get back to his full strength, how the operation had been an interruption in an otherwise very healthy lifestyle:

I've had to suspend Kisertraining [for the last] ten months. It's strength training, but also based in a medical [approach to] health. I couldn't do that for ten months because of the operation. This morning I had a conversation with the doctor again, then a re-introduction to the equipment with a physio – what I need to do to rebuild muscle strength.

Wendy even half-admitted this was the case noting how:

Of course, if someone is ill, we talk about it. When Roger had his operation, then obviously we'll talk about it. But this is a healing... it's a health process, and then it's talked about in a "how can we fix this, how can we make sure he gets better..". It's not something that... should bring the group down or anything.

Thus these incidents had a tendency to be placed away from the broader frame of ageing as a process, presented as isolated. But there was also a general avoidance of talking about health issues – minor or major, altogether, the implications of which will be explored next.

Avoidance of ‘health chat’ and of talking about more major issues

Most members were keen to emphasize to me the importance of avoiding what they referred to as ‘illness chat’, which many in the group reflected on as depressing or dispiriting. As Beth described it, *‘We all have [health] problems we could talk about for hours... “This week I’ve been at the doctor’s because...”, that sort of thing. It would be tedious.’* Wendy went slightly further when talking about finding a balance between an exchange of useful information and what she felt was too much:

It’s better, a middle way. Not too much age [talk]... that makes us just like old people! Just whining! [makes a whining sound]. So not “Oh, here’s my problem today, da da da”. And for the group as a whole, health as a topic? Och! That’s horrible, just too medical! [both laugh]

Although Wendy was the only one to voice an avoidance of ‘being old people’ out loud, many members implied illness chat should be avoided for this reason, and was avoided at least when I was with the group. There seemed to me to be a mutually agreed boundary that had evolved: joking about generalised issues of age, but steering clear of individualised health issues or age-related decline as a group, day-to-day. This was reported by most of the group to be never truer than in the weekly Plenum meetings, indeed a consensus that health issues, including more serious ones, should not be openly discussed. This was something I had initially misunderstood, believing the *Befindlichkeitsrunde* (a chance to go round the table to see how everyone is feeling) was primarily about health. In fact, several members described to me how the atmosphere had been very uncomfortable when individuals had tried to talk about personal health issues in depth: Beth again, in response to me asking whether anyone discussed health problems at the Plenum, explained:

[hesitates, thinking] ... it depends. A minority does. The majority doesn't. Unless they are feeling in a really bad way, then they might say something. Obviously if someone is really ill, like Wendy [who had cancer] then we already know, and we might talk about practical things around it, helping out with a stay in hospital. But there are two people with chronic illnesses [more recently, both newer arrivals] ... who were talking a lot about that. One of them heard that the rest of us don't want to hear all the details about his illness [laughs] and now he doesn't talk about it so much.

Several members claimed that this was a policy most enforced by John, sometimes presented to me as the de facto leader of the group, thus quite the opposite of the impression he had given me on the train that day. Judith – who along with her (now ex-) partner are the newest members of the group, and thus were unfamiliar with its decorum – related to me how use of the group's unusual extent of medical and care experience is discouraged:

So... John is a doctor, and Alison is a doctor, and Clive is a doctor too. When we first came, Roger had his back problems and Clive used to be involved with orthopaedics, manipulation therapy and so on. I said to Roger [at the plenum meeting] that he should ask Clive, he might give him some tips. But then John said "You should know, that we do NOT treat each other!" There was obviously a rule that doctoring [skills] were not used in the group. It's changed a bit, because Clive likes doing that, but it's "behind the scenes".

Yet there were few who seemed to really disagree, either about avoidance of health chat generally, or discussions about more major health issues when the *whole* group was together, as evidenced at the Plenum and during other times that I was with the group (irrespective of whether John was there). As previously mentioned in Chapter 6, on one occasion I went along to the group's Sunday evening *Gesprachabend* – a non-compulsory opportunity for members to have a drink and discuss issues of their choosing – at which John was not present. The conversation ranged around several topics, mainly of a serious nature and on the topic of 'wellbeing', and the challenge of finding peace with oneself. Yet I sensed a skirting around the issue of health and potential decline. As with the Plenum I did detect a certain awkwardness among members around certain subjects. I considered whether this was in part my presence as observer, but Alison did later acknowledge, especially in respect of the *Gesprachabend*,

that although the conversation was more stilted in part because the women were less comfortable with me as the only man present, the members there would have been unhappy to dwell on personal health.

Rosie, as a relatively new member, told me on one occasion how she had learned how the whole group together was not the forum for health matters:

It took me a while to learn what's ok, and what is not. It's because of the whole group together... it's not ok there to say "I heard about your illness, can I help?". With someone... in a circle of close friends within the group, yes. But not at the plenum.

I raised this again with her one day when we were out walking as a group, as she had been away for a time and I hadn't been able to follow up in an interview what I had heard about incidents at the Plenum. Rosie implied to me that actually this was as much about not wishing to share personal information with some members of the group, rather than an arbitrary policy; while LAiC includes many close friendships, it also includes several people who are not close, and even one or two animosities.

Admittedly I am only able to draw directly on my own experience with the group, but the indication from raising the subject in interviews and less formal conversations reinforces the idea that this is little discussed as a group; the material noted above amounts to almost all of the data I recorded on this theme. I was unsurprisingly not able to be party to the conversations on the subject between individuals, perhaps with one small exception. Difficulties with my (aforementioned) knee problem led to a conversation with Beth one day as we were the last of the group to get up from a restaurant table, and which triggered a series of occasional conversations that we had about our health and ageing (usually not audio recorded). I felt that I was closer to Beth than I was with many of the group, and she seemed to feel comfortable discussing the theme with me, and was even more open in a few weeks' worth of diary entries that she shared with me, in particular regarding her failing eyesight. It is a serious matter:

I have a problem with my eyes, maybe I told you already? But anyway, I'm going blind. It's not a thing of... getting new glasses, it's going blind. Judith, Jill, or... Jan, they know. So I can say "Shit! I can't..." or I say "I can't read this, can you help me please".

[Me: asking as a friend?]

As friends, yes. But I wouldn't share that with the whole group, wouldn't talk about it. We talk about the things we really have to – like Manfred's operation – yes, sure, he can tell us how he's feeling now! But that's because he's getting better of course.

Thus, there is evidence that these things are discussed privately between some in the group, but not by the group as a whole. On one hand this is understandable: it is difficult to share among a group, not all of whom are close friends. A potential downside seemed to me to be that a general avoidance of all aspects of health has made it harder for the group to plan for such things becoming a bigger problem in the future, and is the subject of the following section.

Avoidance of confronting a fourth age 'bigger picture'?

While there are undoubtedly difficulties with members discussing the broader issues of health as a group, there is a recognition across the membership that the group is inevitably slowing down. Often this came up within the context that fewer group activities are planned together, especially those that involve physical activity, or major trips away that require planning and travel-related effort. As Roger, who was otherwise quite reticent when talking about health commented:

... we used to walk 20 km or 25km on hiking days. That was ten years ago. Today Jill can't walk because she has knee problems. Wendy, well she's having her thing with the hips. We've all got older... and these days we walk 4 or maybe 5 km together. Amanda still wants to walk 10 km.... I've been out of action for nearly a year because of my [back] surgery. Everything's reducing down, getting slower! [...] When we came together in the beginning, we were all like Beth. Very fit. She can sit – I can't even [laughs] put my socks on! It's so difficult, I can't reach! Not just because of the operation. [...] [Beth] sits there, both feet under her legs... like a yoga thing. Ten years ago, the rest of us were like that too. [laughs] Now we have grown older and it's different.

In fact, I had wondered at an early stage of the fieldwork whether there was a degree to which some of the group sought to position themselves apart from some of the oldest, slightly less active members of the group. Certainly Beth lamented to me the fact that there are no group members any longer able to join her on more physically arduous trips away, such as cycling (although on at least one occasion she did do a day's cycling down the route of the Oder river on the border with Poland, with Judith and Amanda). I sometimes felt she was keen, on walking days, to demonstrate to me her relative youth and fitness (often doing stretches and various exercises as we chatted). Similarly, Roger's weight training and other activities, as previously noted, seemed at times to be a way of performing or positioning his role as the youngest in the group, even though many in the group felt that he had on more than one occasion worsened his injuries by returning to training too quickly. But these incidents were notable by their exception, and I am reluctant to use them to paint a stronger picture than was really the case: Roger's own comments above seemed to reflect this, and I did not feel overall that there was any real attempt for some to reject their own ageing in relation to others in the group.

Planning (or not planning) for declining health and future care

But, as with talk around health issues that has been explored above, there does seem to be an absence of discussion around the implications of the slowing down and physical decline as a *group*, despite a willingness to talk to me about these things in private. Others were less happy even to discuss the future of the group in these terms at all. Roger was not alone in seemingly seeking to avoid the deeper implications of the theme, instead signing off with a cheerful statement that had little real meaning, describing how '*... in the end we'll just be here together as doddery old people [Tattergreis].*'

One incident is perhaps an exception that proves the rule. Sitting next to Beth during a pitstop on one of the walking days, along with a friend of the group who had come along that day, the friend had talked of her experience of her own mother's dementia. This prompted Beth to relate in turn a story of another cohousing group of older friends who had spent years planning a shared retirement in a project they aimed to build on the North Sea coast. During the prolonged planning period, a large majority of the fifteen or so members had either died or succumbed to dementia (in the context of the story these seemed to amount to the same

thing). Her story was left hanging – neither the friend nor I could think of anything either suitable to add – and later Beth repeated the story to the rest of the group, to a similar response. Beth admits herself that she is quite outspoken, and less attuned to the conventions of German conversational norms (having lived abroad and in a relatively isolated location for many years) but this felt to me like an example of her provocateur status in the group – a deliberate transgression in touching on the kind of thoughts she knew were to be avoided.

Perhaps another telling example was supplied by Judith, as just the two of us were talking one day in the common flat. Indicating the clutter that had built up, she noted that ‘the medical folder’ used to be kept there, but was missing. When I queried this, she explained:

We once talked about whether everyone has a living will. There should be a folder here with certain medical data in it, But I think only two or three of us have put our stuff down here. Then it always seems to disappear again. [...] I think this is important, but I’m not sure [...] if others do. As we get older, these things are important, I think, like the subject of a living will.

Both incidents struck me as examples of a kind of evasion – albeit in small ways – of thinking about the implications of such things for a group growing older together, once again despite the underlying intent of the whole LAiC venture to be planning for this. Perhaps though as individuals this is to expect too much, that any person might have such a reluctance.

Trying to dig deeper, I found that one-to-one discussions based on relevant text extracts from the flyer often resulted in responses that described what the group does *already*, i.e. some of the positive group responses to the ‘one off’ health issues described earlier. But as I pressed further on specific issues, it was clear that there has been little recent thinking about the future in terms of health, potential decline and care, either individually or as a group. While most of the group was aware of the wording of the flyer, and gave their assent to the principles in rather vague terms, there was little consensus about what should happen in practice now and into the future, if anything at all. Even Alison, who I perceived to be the founder member who maintained the clearest thinking on the issue, admitted that:

We don't yet know yet is what happens when one of us is sick for a long time. We've got a history of various conditions, but nothing that's really yet become a problem day to day. [...] We have an image here that maybe if several of us needed caregivers, that we could organise some common care or... we have no idea if that's realistic. You [addressing me] can maybe find that out as a concrete case. Theoretically, it makes no sense to discuss it. It's clear that we can offer some care between us, but how far we can go with that, we don't know yet.

On one hand, this makes sense: it is hard to make detailed plans when exact needs are not known. Yet there seems to have been no discussion in recent years about the principles or practical logistics and financing that are involved, for instance the boundaries and limits around care by the group, or how external support might be brought in. Judith was the most honest in the group, in admitting that the issue is avoided:

It's clear we couldn't offer each other much real help, but getting care in [from outside], that's something we haven't talked about for a long time! And the motto... "Not in a home", I think it meant that we take care of each other... but I don't know if that's really still the consensus. Everyone got older, and doesn't want to think about it anymore that way!

Pauline says something very similar, but expresses her frustration that if the group is unable to talk about these issues together, then they are also unable to make any future plans:

Me: And you say, that with LAiC there's not so much spoken about these things?

P: It's changing now. Some say: "That's life, we're getting older." Some now have back problems and problems with their hips. But the topic of "Alter" – some do not want to be old, but they are! But not everyone. But some.

She raises the idea previously noted, hinting at the difference between one-off illnesses that the group can respond to, that will have a resolution, and an aversion to addressing *chronic* illness, as a greater fear by the group, the beginning of the end. But she went on to touch on how this is also reflected by attitudes toward disability. None of the group has a condition that

could be categorised as a disability as such, and Pauline hints at a difference between this and her previous group, that made this easier in a way:

[The previous project] wasn't planned to accommodate disabled people, it just turned out that way. [...] The building was renovated in 2005 and has been adapted for disabled and old people. There was a lift added to the outside, which cost a lot, but the whole thing was subsidised by the city of Dresden. And this [funding] came with the requirement that we should be open to anyone disabled who applied. But that was fine. It was barrier free, everything was adapted so it fitted for older and disability, so disabled people could live there alone, very independently. And the community was open to that! They were good members, nice people.

[...] But it also meant the block was already planned to fit for the way to age when one becomes physically weaker. And I think that made it easier to think about those things. You could think about not being so able, not as a disaster.

It had not really struck me until she said this that none of the group had any noticeable ambulatory impairment, e.g. walking with a stick, with several members priding themselves on their degree of fitness, and I wondered if this good fortune – for whatever reason – had further helped to temporarily insulate the group from forward planning around issues of potential impairment. I never probed this issue further: the question of whether consciously or not the group has filtered its membership to accept only those more physically able. But it is notable that although the main cluster for the group does have lift access, there is no way of accessing the common apartment except by stairs. More notably, several other apartments are accessed from short staircases, while others are split over a number of levels, with multiple short, steep flights²⁹.

²⁹ The renovations for the group had included removal of internal walls, adding balconies and so on, it struck me as odd that what in the UK would fall under 'homes for life' had not been considered here.

Health, illness and potential decline: discussion

At the end of 2017, it was still possible to describe LAiC on the whole as relatively fit, ambulant, and independent of care services. Yet the group are in their 70s, some nearly 80, and clearly this will not always be the case. There is a paradox here: as a group, the subjects of health, decline and care planning are largely avoided – in one sense understandable given how difficult these aspects of later life are to face up to – yet, in another sense this is surprising given the group's original explicit ambitions, a central part of the reason for its existence.

Privately – both individually with me, and between some of the members – these subjects are talked about, and the problem recognised. And most of the group members acknowledge a problem, whilst often also be unwilling to address possible solutions. But while there is an avoidance of any serious discussion of potential decline (and thus of planning around it) between the whole group informally, this also extends to the formal arena, such as the Plenum meetings. In part this seems to be a result of LAiC's take on a consensus approach of allowing one or two people to block decisions or discussions (noted in Chapter 4), for instance in terms of managing care services brought in from outside. As Judith notes:

I think it would always be important to hear people's thoughts on whether this is still an idea [getting help in] for our group. ... but if some say "no", that would be out of the question for the whole group.

Perhaps a culture of avoidance rather than attempting to find agreement over such issues has been in some sense beneficial; many clearly find 'moaning about' health issues dispiriting and members are able to attribute other more 'cheerful' attributes to membership. But this seems to have led to a blocking of a bigger picture around practical planning for future health issues. It could be imagined that a balance is possible, that a functioning group might be able to find space, even if ring-fenced in some way, for a deeper discussion. In the closing weeks of my fieldwork period, it emerged that there might be some movement on this apparent gridlock however. But some in the group are planning to edge around this. As Wendy described it:

What happens to us when a few of us get sick? Or are increasingly in need of help and care and so on? [...] And the discussion about it... has been hovering for a year, half a year. We are now scheduled for the next Gesprächsabend, where everyone is there, and needs to take a view on this seriously: "Where do I stand on that?", "What's important to me?" This is already in the air for me! And not only in the air, it is also spoken. But not yet in the group. Sometimes Alison or me, or with Tina. But we always end up agreeing: "Wait for a bit!" [we both laugh]. It's always tomorrow. But it's for the group— we're circling around it. And it will be slow, but it's coming. The theme is: "How will we go on?" [into the future]. Because everybody remembers, "ten years ago, I was someone else." Now we're more limited, and new questions need to be asked about how we can deal with it.

This potential coming together on the issue is returned to, along with the related theme of succession, at the end of this chapter.

8.5 Succession issues

What will become of LAiC in the coming years? When I talked to members about the future, curiously there was a recognition that without action, the group would fade away. Janet was typical in observing that *'obviously things would need to be worked out somehow, we don't want it that it goes down and down, so that only one person is left, looking after the garden alone'*. Yet everyone spoke as if this were a far-off problem that would probably be resolved, rather than an approaching existential threat; yet members were largely unwilling to be drawn further on this, on how such a scenario might be avoided. It seems more likely that if no action is taken, the group will simply dwindle, with individual members dying, or having to go into care, likely with greater involvement by families.

Despite the aging position of the group, the majority of responses to my questioning focused on finding the *'right kind of person'* for the group, or homilies about potential members of *'leaving it too late'* to commit (as explored in a different context at the end of Chapter 6). Yet these are the kind of statements that might make more sense coming from members at a more formative stage of a group, or for one where there was a healthy supply of potential new recruits (Hudson, 2017); they seem of less and less relevance for the LAiC group. The greater

problem for LAiC is the need for a relatively fixed, stable group of people in their 70s to continually attract younger members, in their late 50s or early 60s, in order to keep the group alive by bringing in new blood, by loosening the 'right person' definition. Yet as with discussions around care services, there has not been a group consensus about how this might be achieved, or indeed whether it should happen at all.

I do not believe that such issues are insurmountable, and indeed groups have succeeded elsewhere in passing the torch to younger members. But it is the aim here to explore some of the reasons that LAiC as a group have found this difficult.

Lack of consensus over recruitment

For many in the group, it was always clear that new members of the group should be younger than the current membership, although others were less clear. Both John and Roger seem to have tried to get agreement from others to a *Wunschgrenze*, or ideal (lower age) limit, that new members should be 65 or younger. Several of the group hinted that there had been strong objections to this by others in the group; I was unable to find anyone who – in talking to me at least – would admit to such objections, but several went on to talk of how an exact age limit was not so important or, once again, the greater need to find 'the right kind of person'. As Wendy put it:

Some say: *"There are people who are 80 and are still so young in their heads and still fit – of course they can come!"* The others say, *"For God's sake, that's no use!"* This is really a question for the group. It's very different. I always think of it as: how is the person in their mind? How do they act? – I'm not stuck on age. There are also 50-year-olds who are already half asleep. [I laugh] This is not a question for me, but it is a big question for some. They say, *"They are just too old, they cannot come to us."*

Beth is clear in seeing the need for new younger members in the context of her own needs, as *'definitely younger, 60 or 60 plus, definitely not over 65'* as she feels this would open up more possibilities socially, especially in terms of physical activity. She described to me how her friends who would be willing to join in the cycling trips and other activities she enjoys live too

far away to organise anything regular, but that the LAiC group is just not young (and therefore fit) enough. At 69, with a majority of the group over 70, she does not reflect though on how such an attraction might not be reciprocal in terms of joining the group – this aspect is discussed later.

Several of the group were reported as being against new members altogether, although again it was hard to ascertain exactly who. Clive, as a newcomer and relative outsider, hints that again, consensus is the problem, with one or two people able to block a process:

... the group was not very open. There was always resistance. But there were only isolated cases. But also, there are no initiatives by LAiC to show ads. To say: *"We are a group, we want to enlarge. Come!"* That does not exist, as far as I know.

Amanda claims to be not against new members, but:

I'm also critical of finding new members again and again. This was a constant point of conflict. [...] But I think, in the past, we sometimes wasted too much energy on whether to find new people or not.

Rosie goes further, but explains her qualms as those of others:

Some people wanted it to be like that, complete, not always new people as it's so exhausting. But I suppose that's me too. Because with the new people, and trying to make room, then all the common ventures fall away! I think this group carries more of this *Wirgehörendzusammengefühl* [sense of belonging together]. We belong together – over the many years gone, we have grown together. But everyone else who comes from the outside — When Veronika and I arrived, I definitely felt that there was a situation [among the others] of *'This is too much for me! It has to stop, how else can I get to know such people?'* So that's the argument that's also around.

Implicit for some in discussions over new members is the *expansion* of the group, a logical stance since the only alternative would be to wait for each member to die or move out due to care needs. Yet, again, there is no consensus – despite the fact that this has recently happened albeit unintentionally: as following Clive and Judith’s separation Judith moved into a flat adjoining the main cluster, achieved by LAiC lobbying the estate management despite the apparent barrier of the new income-eligibility based rules imposed by the Berlin government.

Once again Amanda confirms there’s opinions on both sides (although largely in the abstract – the group seems entirely happy with the outcome for Judith as an existing member), and for herself comments that she *‘sees no reason that we should become larger and larger as a group’*. Roger agrees, citing the experience of two other groups he knows via his cohousing activism – one extant and the other which, as previously mentioned, has reached construction phase on the estate. He feels both groups have problems with too many members to effectively make decisions or feel like a coherent group (between 30 and 40 each), commenting that as a full group: *‘even with only 13 people it’s difficult to work out how to talk to each other’*.

In fact, around three years into LAiC’s life together (when the group was both smaller and younger), the members had rejected the possibility of becoming quickly much bigger:

Me: And you called it ‘LAiC 2’?

Alison: No, that was later. LAiC 2 was when were already living here, and a lot more people wanted to join us here. They wanted to join us here. The whole room was full of people! And it was unrealistic to think they could all join us! So we told them to start a new group. We had been living here for two or three years already.

Me: And did they start a new group?

Alison: No! There is only Agnes left. She always comes to [the community centre]. She was the only one I think we hurt somehow. Because she wanted to come and we said *"No, do this other thing!"* [Sounding suddenly wistful] She would have liked to come into the group.

Yet for those that want to remain as a small group but agree the need to attract younger members, it is unclear how this might work, given the difficulties and tensions (discussed in Chapter 5) that have occurred with each new member. Discussing the issue one day at the weekly community centre lunch – prompted by the presence in the room of a large number of members from the planned cohousing group whose project was under construction – Rosie and Judith both agreed that the best approach would be if two or three people came together *‘so as not to disturb the group structure’*.

The present challenge of attracting younger members, anyway

Despite these various sometimes opposing views, there is one more obvious problem that renders these positions largely irrelevant. Talking in the (earlier) context about bringing in younger members, Wendy points out having a rule that:

... for example a person should only be 60 years old... that’s a joke! There *are* no applicants that young. There are not many, now I think, who are older, either.

Individually, in interviews or less formal one-on-one meetings, members seemed able to reflect quite realistically on why this might be, even though they found it more difficult to think directly about the risk that LAiC might simply die out. On one hand, they recognise that to some extent there is a generational-cultural divide, which Wendy, for instance, describes:

I imagine it is difficult to get a 50-year-old now, and here are all those old-68ers who had certain ideals – they just have to understand the situation! Or one has to think: *“What do they want from the group, is it something different?”* I think this is difficult. They would really expect more from the group, or say that we have to participate in their lives. And that’s not possible, I think.

Interestingly, at Group One – a group that, bar one member, is also all very close in age – this has been practically demonstrated. One member describes how:

Petrushka is much younger, but Peter was as old as us – our generation. He was more one of us³⁰, and she was not. And with Peter's death, it looks like she will leave, she wants to sell here. It makes sense I think, she's not comfortable [here].

Some of the potential tensions or incompatibilities between those in their third age and those in late middle age have been discussed in Chapter 6. And not unrelated to these issues, there is perhaps a greater barrier, which again many of the members admit to recognising: that younger people in their 50s, or their 60s even, will perceive a group such as LAiC in its current age range as too old, setting themselves apart as younger, 'Third Agers'. Even if potential younger members are not wary of something as specific as being overwhelmed by the care needs of the majority older members, it seems likely that a much older group is not an attractive proposition, given societal attitudes. Judith was frank in noting how she would like to have a mix of ages in the group, as young as 50, but:

[...] no one who is 50 wants to come to this group! I would never have gone to old people like we are now, at all! At 50, I was still ... [laughs] - do you understand? There will be no one who says, *"I'm going to join this group now"* and they are all 70- to 80-year-olds. From this point onwards one would have had to create something different from the beginning.

Alison agrees, but with even closer ages:

If I came in at 64 or 65 and most in the group are already well over 70 ... then I'd think about it! 70, that's it again... it's like a magic number. Those five, six years we're older to others, that matters! If you're over 75, every year counts!

Interestingly, a member of Group Two still in her fifties (and one of those who rejects any notion that her group is explicitly 'older' or intends to grow older together) reinforces this notion of a line that is crossed, if not between a third age and a fourth, then between young and truly old:

³⁰ In German, 'unser Typ', translates literally as 'our type', but in context as 'one of us'.

You still have to have the energy, the curiosity [to do a cohousing project], and they wouldn't have that. What I see is that people get stiffer and stiffer, so if you don't take a decision at an early age, when you're 80 you don't... you can't start a new way of living. That's what my impression is.

Me: When you say 'stiffer' you don't mean physically...?

I mean in mind, mentally. And you don't want so much to have things changing, and there's new things, and you're not so much interested in that, I think. I mean, from the people I know, there is often a big phase of interest, when you retire, after 65, or after 60, there's that big interest point, then the curve turns down, later. That's my impression."

Perhaps surprisingly, an older member of the same group (in her late 60s) reflects a similar view, even distancing herself from her peers:

If I also see fellow-older people, friends and so on: they have very rigid thoughts! They just don't want to change. That's why. Young people are more flexible, more interesting. They want to live life. But those young people don't want to live with *old* people!

Me: No?

Well, would you like to live as a 40-year-old with a 70-year-old?"

Thus, while in Chapter 6, members were agreed that there were those who had '*left it too late*' to join a group such as LAiC, it could be argued that in fact LAiC may have left it too late to attract new, younger members. Even beyond this problem, there is in any case for this particular group a further practical barrier. New rules, introduced at the beginning of 2017 by the Berlin government with the aim of slowing the city's rising rental costs and consequent gentrification, mean that to qualify for LAiC potential members must qualify as being on a low income, and be able to demonstrate a specific housing need. While one of the group reminded me firmly that excluding those on higher incomes was by no means a negative, it does however further reduce the pool of potential applicants, which already – as several admit – seems small.

Moving forward?

It could be concluded from much of this section that despite significant successes, LAiC has failed to address some of its core aims – and future challenges – at a fundamental level. Yet as noted, this is not the whole story. During the closing weeks of my fieldwork, the group had decided to come together for a discussion evening around the theme of ‘future plans’. Prompted in part by my lengthy questioning of the group over many months about ageing and issues of future planning, the plan had been pushed primarily by Alison, who along with one or two others was looking to begin ‘*slowly, slowly*’ to focus the members’ minds on matters of succession and future plans, and trying to gauge what ultimately the members saw as of value in the group. Unfortunately it was just at this point that after many months my fieldwork had to end; it is important to report though that the first event (which they preferred me not to attend) was reported as being very successful, and generally agreed as the beginning of a process in which the group hoped to again find itself, and begin to consider its future.

8.6 Summary and discussion

The critical tone of this chapter is not intended to downplay the significant achievements of LAiC as a sociable group, in remaining together and supporting each other both emotionally and practically over the years. The indirect health benefits of such sociability are well established, if difficult to prove in individual cases. Yet an exploration of the lived experience of the group has suggested a strange contradiction between how a group that was specifically created to address ageing together can, in the lived reality, be less clear cut. On one hand the members rally round when responding to a specific incident or need, but on the other find it hard – or rather avoid entirely – an ‘undefinable’ future and the implications of ageing.

More than just creating a sociable group, LAiC’s core founding idea was that the group would support and care for each other in later life, or at least to manage care services from elsewhere as needed. Further, such a position implied that this mutual care might be continued in lieu of support from others who might normally play such a role: primarily partners or family

members. This was an ambitious goal from the start, going perhaps against the prevailing societal norm of 'being independent' of others.

On one hand, it should be acknowledged that the group's achievements – both in the instrumental exchange of neighbouring support on a small scale and around more major issues such as hospital visits – are significant. The exploration of the literature on neighbourly support and reciprocity in Chapter 2, while finding that such relationships are not unlikely to occur naturally even among non-kin, noted the difficulties many individuals found with giving, but more so receiving, informal care and support that often could not be reciprocated. While it was stressed that such support was much more likely to grow from pre-existing strong social relationships, these cannot be assumed to exist evenly or equitably in every neighbourhood situation; the concept of intentional senior community could be viewed as primarily a response to this.

On the other hand, this chapter has taken a more critical look at some of the reasons that the LAiC's aims have not always been addressed in practice, primarily by observing, questioning and considering how the group talks and behaves around these issues. In doing so the aim is not to thinking not about the group's 'failures', but rather how future groups and projects might better address these concerns:

Why, first of all, are issues of health avoided quite so much, or treated as isolated instances? When I spoke in confidence with individuals the picture was slightly different: while understandably worried about failing health, there was a willingness to talk, and members were not 'in denial' as such. It is understandable that any such group might choose to take a positive stance by avoiding 'moaning' about health, fearing that it might become a characteristic of the group, dragging them back to the 'old age behaviour' that being part of LAiC might, they hoped would avoid. Indeed, I enjoyed being with the group, who I found to be curious and engaged, upbeat and funny (despite that my focus on inherently gloomier themes throughout these chapters might suggest otherwise). But as a group, although accepting of various ailments and more significant health incidents, placing these in a wider context of age-related decline is avoided.

The group's interpretation of consensus decision-making may have played a role here, in allowing a minority of members who did most feel the need to avoid the most difficult subjects to enforce this avoidance on everyone. But also, there is an extent to which new members have not been encouraged to actively commit to the goals originally set out, with founder members equally allowing this to slip. Taking a step back, I observe that as a group LAiC have been relatively lucky in their health, at least in terms of chronic conditions. While there have been individual illnesses, misfortunes and losses, these have been managed as one-offs; while mutual support has been critical at these times, and a real success for LAiC, the longer-term implications have been side-lined.

Further, away from these 'headline' incidents, there is a tendency of members to distance themselves from the possibility of needing support. Again, this is a paradox: that perhaps the kind of person who is attracted to such a degree of forward planning and impressive pragmatism is also, when it really comes to the crunch, the kind of person least happy to be prepared to *accept* care from others? Notwithstanding, there are suggestions that the group has learned this of themselves, at least begun to recognise that this is an issue and to consider how they might change.

The difficulty that LAiC has had around succession, of recruiting new, younger people to ensure the sustainability of the group overall, is also I believe partly rooted in an identity that the group has built for itself – although once again the problem of reaching consensus has played a role. A mutually imagined 'right kind of person' has allowed the group to construct a kind of third age ideal, to seek new members who match themselves in spirit, when perhaps the focus should be above all on what is essential and practical: recruiting younger members. For a group who like LAiC have known each other for some years, and have developed the bonds that have been explored in previous chapters, it is especially hard to face the disruption of new members, especially those who if younger, might be perceived as not being a good fit.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

This thesis represents an investigation of the lived experience of senior cohousing groups in Berlin, and has followed a long-held interest in the subject that began when I first heard about such groups when I lived in the city. My research has taken an open, grounded approach, taking the form of an ethnography, with the aim of exploring how later life is differently negotiated as part of such a group. In doing so, I have sought to understand the group members' lives through the framing of socio-gerontological themes of ageing as a process, and the concepts of the third and fourth age.

My fieldwork comprised a period of more than seven months spent in Berlin in contact with three groups, but primarily with LAiC – 'Living Alone in Community' – a senior cohousing group whose members moved in together in 2007. Notably, their project took a different path from the 'traditional' formation of such projects, with the group renting a cluster of apartments in an existing estate block, and my study also represented a chance to investigate the implications and potential of this.

This chapter begins by summarising the case for this research's contribution to knowledge. But the core of this concluding chapter will draw together my findings from the previous empirical chapters and consider the key themes that emerged, where applicable also reflecting on the implications for such groups forming in the UK in the future. While these discussions broadly follow the themes presented in the chapters, I have drawn them together into seven key aspects of my findings, beginning with a reflection on the membership of the group and concluding with what LAiC's experience might tell us about the sustainability of such groups over many years together. I end with a reflection on my research, and thoughts on possible paths for further research.

9.2 Contribution to knowledge

The lived experience of senior cohousing and the implications of its social dynamics on its ability to achieve its key aims have received limited attention in the literature to date, predominantly because of the absence of established groups in the UK. The central focus of this thesis has been to add to our knowledge in this area by researching established communities in Berlin. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of such groups after many years together, I took a grounded, ethnographic approach, combined with interviews, observing and participating to the deepest extent I was able. This approach allowed me to reflect and respond throughout the research period, and has allowed me to deliberate and reflect more deeply than narrow data sets would allow.

A number of key themes emerged from my research in relation to senior cohousing which, although touched on in the literature to date, I argue have not been explored to this depth in the context of ageing identity, and have often been assumed to be more 'straightforward' issues in the literature. My findings support the case that senior cohousing brings significant benefits to its members as supportive communities, and importantly that such success is based on a social 'frameworks' rather than friendships or family-like social bonds. However, drawing on thinking from the field of socio-gerontology, I have argued that, ageing identity plays a critical role in the identity of the group as a whole, and in its long-term sustainability, and should receive more attention in future literature.

Further, I have put the case that the various ways in which members of a group such as LAiC negotiate their later lives, means that key aims of senior cohousing – prime among them recognising and accepting the need for mutual support as members grow older – may present some unforeseen challenges for groups of people who have been focussed perhaps more than others on demonstrating a new image of later life. Ideas of ageing identity have similarly been drawn on to explore the potential difficulties in the process of succession for such groups: whether a group identity that has in many ways been beneficial might also discourage the recruitment of a necessary new wave of younger members.

A focus on LAiC as a group also provided the opportunity to explore the potential advantages and pitfalls for senior cohousing of so-called retrofit approaches. The project represents only one interpretation of the forms retrofit might take, but is intended to add to the thus far very small literature, important especially in the context of the UK Cohousing movement's hopes that it might be the primary opportunity for scaling up senior cohousing.

In the field of socio-gerontology, my aim is to contribute to previous ethnographically-based work on communities of older people. This approach has been popular in the past, e.g. Arlie Hochschild's major work of the 1960s, but has received less attention in recent years. This thesis returns to this approach to portray a group of individuals who – while being of a later generation and particular kind of person that is more independently minded and confident in many ways – nonetheless have chosen consciously as a group to forge a new path of collaborative ageing in the face of a wider society that still remains structurally ageist.

9.3 Discussion of findings

LAiC's members, and becoming a group

LAiC is a very different kind of project in many ways from the other two groups that I have at times drawn on in the empirical chapters, and from many of the emerging owner-occupied senior cohousing groups in the UK, (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015; Brenton, 2017; Hudson, 2017). Unlike those others, it was clear that the group's intention from a formative stage – and noted in the manifesto – was to be a rental group. But LAiC was also unusual in finally succeeding against the odds by renting a cluster of apartments in an existing social housing estate; an arrangement that suggests the potential of the concept. LAiC's membership is highly consistent with the European studies summarised by Labit (2015), who notes that women: *'often single and financially less well off than men, are found in larger numbers in co-housing and are more often than not initiators of such projects'*. But more notably, the group is remarkably similar to one German group she describes: that all of the women in the group (fourteen in a group of sixteen, and of the same generation as LAiC) had had professional careers, and that this was more unusual for women of that generation in Germany.

The fact that the group represents a particular response to the senior cohousing model is emphasized by the contrast with Groups One and Two: the latter tend to be couples with the economic means to fund their own building project, whereas LAiC is a group of mainly older women, all of whom are now single, and although largely educated to higher level and having had professional careers, could not be described as wealthy. There is a contrast here with the other two groups, and with groups in the UK that funded their project primarily through their own economic capital: the rental option made it possible for those with few economic assets to use forms of *social* capital – the right connections or forms of bridging capital to hear of the group, to make contact and to be ‘the right kind of person’ to be accepted by the group. And whereas the other groups might be portrayed as having used their economic assets as a means to obtain the ‘strong’ social bonds that they felt they lacked, or at least were lacking as neighbourhood ties, the LAiC group, it could be argued, used primarily bridging capital to do the same.

The role of an older identity, as an attraction to the group

Chapter 2’s discussion of the senior cohousing literature noted that a motivation for forming or joining group’s is in part a practical one: a response to potential future isolation as lifestyles change post-retirement, and families and friends who are often geographically scattered. This certainly played a role for many of LAiC’s members, but at the same time a more complex set of motivations also emerged that relate to other aspects of ageing and identity; for some the group represented a way of establishing a new life that otherwise would not have been possible. Wendy’s motivations for instance were not straightforward: to leave her home, region, family and close friends to move to a city where she had few contacts to live with a group of people she did not previously know. She was able to do this, she felt, because LAiC offered a ready-made, proximate community that might serve to replace these other things in certain ways, and potentially improve on them.

Other members framed their choice as a previously unfulfilled wish for a community life, with inter-generational groups rejected on the more practical grounds that young families’ lives are focussed elsewhere, that there is a lack of shared objectives. Yet an identification with LAiC as a specifically older group – with people of a similar age who understand each other, and to a

certain extent a shared generational culture – was strongly evident. As Wendy also emphasized, she made such a difficult decision because the group acknowledged a shared identity, a group of peers of similar ages.

Perhaps stronger than all of these aspects though was that group members were attracted by a shared attitude to life, signified through different findings that align with ideas of the third age, although in this case in less consumerist terms than theorised by Gilleard and Higgs (cf Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). Significantly the members identify as 68ers, a specific subset of their generation who regarded themselves as having made a more decisive break with the past than many of their cohort, and are known for challenging societies and political conventions.

The appeal of an urban life also played a role in their particular identity; on the one hand this can be presented as a practical response (good transport links, facilities close at hand), but on the other more than one LAiC member spoke of the cultural opportunities, the excitement of city life as a rejection of a passive retirement to the quiet suburbs or a small town. It is notable that members of both LAiC and Group One had moved from the countryside or small towns to the capital city. Group One in fact inverted the relationship between older parent and younger family, responding to geographical isolation by *making* their urban home a destination for family and friends – a very ‘third age’ response to retaining agency in later life.

Perhaps most telling was what LAiC member Rosie described as the need for members to be a ‘certain kind of person’, having an agility of mind to commit to moving in to a group that not everyone possesses. In part this reflects the need for the group to create an identity, however, my own contact with some of the individuals that Roger described as ‘floating voters’ made me certain that there are many, even in the ‘outer circle’ of senior cohousing activists, for whom the practicalities of a real project and the demands of moving will never mean it never happens, irrespective of financial and development concerns.

Thus a response to the question ‘*does senior cohousing take a certain kind of person?*’ the answer would have to be a cautious ‘yes’. Forming or even joining such projects takes a considerable effort of will and a real commitment, demonstrated by the group members, to achieve something that remains a pioneering concept both in the UK and Germany. To what

extent the very specific cultures of the 68ers or the related attractions to a generation more familiar with a mode of community living than perhaps later generations play a role in such groups is uncertain, at least from this study. But while a common culture to some extent is clearly required to bring groups together, the attitudes expressed do not seem exclusive in the sense of a tiny activist group, and the appeal may well be much wider than the limited public knowledge of senior cohousing has so far suggested.

Social architecture, mutual support and reciprocity

The failure of LAiC's original plan to build from scratch (or for a housing company to develop for them) reduced the group down to a very small kernel of members, who, from their own descriptions, were closely united in their shared concept of what their community might be. What was subsequently at the root of the tensions that nearly overwhelmed the group seemed contested: some related the problems to me as around religious difference, or differing personalities. But others made a more convincing case that the group strained to deal with later arrivals: in part an inherent tension between the original core members and those who came later, challenging those members' idea of what the group was.

Labit considers such conflict to some degree inevitable, and quotes an (unpublished) study by Alheit of one of Germany's first senior cohousing groups:

... the project has changed considerably since the beginnings in 1994 and [...] may be losing its soul due to conflict between the militant founding members and newcomers who are less involved in collective life.

Quoted in Labit, 2015: 35.

Brenton (1998) also finds from case studies of senior cohousing in the Netherlands that a significant source of conflict stemmed from those who were instrumental in creating the project retaining dominant roles in the community once living together. Jarvis similarly notes the potential asymmetry of relationships (in all cohousing), rooted in part in the unequal roles or financial stake of different members at formation: '*... as reasons why the delicate balance of collaboration is not always mutual or harmonious.*' (2015: 98). These examples are rooted

specifically with the founder group: and although this was partly the case with LAiC, the conflicts seemed to be as much around the disruption caused by the arrival of *each and every* new arrival in the group.

For LAiC, it was striking to hear how difficult it has been for some of the members to bond with the rest of the group, a social division that to some extent is still reflected in the composition of the various sub-groups. While these sub-groups do overlap and are not always tightly defined, it is clear that not all the tensions have been fully resolved, and that this may explain the reluctance by many in the group to go through the process of further recruitment – an issue that will be returned to later in the context of succession.

Nonetheless, LAiC has adapted, and found ways to deal with such conflicts, partly by adopting the idea of a ‘Pater(in)’ or godfather/mother role for new members. There is perhaps something that could be learned directly from the group’s experience here: that there is a need for support and advice for groups not just in the development process, but as the years progress. Although training in decision-making, conflict resolution and other aspects of well-being in the group is emphasized as essential prior to the group living together (cf Durrett, 2009), in LAiC’s case there seemed a discontinuity in passing on this knowledge to new members.

A focus on such tensions and conflicts should not distract however from what LAiC *has* accomplished and the social form it has reached in the present. To a significant extent, the group has achieved a level of reciprocity and mutual understanding emphasized as critical in all cohousing groups by Jarvis (2015). The shared commitment takes a particular form for the group that echoes Jolanki and Vilkkö’s (2015) findings of reciprocal support among the members of an older cohousing group, but is also apparent in their ‘every day’ interactions: members describing the value of always having someone – even a choice of people – to hang out with, to see a film, or go for a drink.

One or two members went further, valuing this ‘willingness’ of other group members as something that could not be assumed even for close friendships, because the relationship was one underpinned by an explicit commitment to be there for each other. What does find agreement among the group members is that the group represents a social form that is not one based around friendships as such – although these play a role – but based on a mutual commitment, a more flexible structure that some described as a ‘framework’, a kind of social backstop. For some members, this is perhaps less than hoped they for – not an ersatz family, nor the close-knit core that the first members experienced so headily. It is closer to how a resident of the OWCH senior cohousing in North London described how she understood the sociality of the group: that *‘what binds us together is not close friendship, but mutual respect’* (Hudson, 2018).

This perception of a group’s social architecture as a ‘framework’ corresponds strongly with Sandstedt and Westin’s (2015) study of four later life cohousing groups in Sweden, who draw upon Tönnies’ concepts to theorise such communities are both an antidote to the spatial and social atomisation of industrial society *‘Gesellschaft’*, and a rejection of the small tight-knit and idealised community of *‘Gemeinschaft’*. They argue that these instead represent a social form that draws on the strengths of both, Tönnies’ concept of the *Bund*. Residents of these relatively large Swedish cohousing groups (40 to 50 people) did not regard each other all as close friends, in fact often those in different sub-groups did not get along at all.

Yet the focus on the idea of framework as a ‘lesser’ form of group existence than that initially envisaged by the group should not diminish LAiC’s social achievement. I would argue that despite compromises, the relationships between group members go beyond the purely instrumental, representing a significant level of emotional support that for most of the members seems unlikely might have existed if they had remained in their previous homes and locations.

The social implications of a spatially 'diffuse' group

Despite most members acknowledging LAiC's arrangement on the estate as a compromise, many also strongly valued its benefits: to have other neighbours, but more importantly the particular balance of privacy and closeness. It is a balance that allows members to 'look out for each other' but not be in each other's faces; in the view of most, the 'cluster apartment' arrangements of Groups One and Two sounded too close, too open to each other's lives.

Spending a large part of a year with LAiC did allow me to see just how little the common flat was actually used: a reflection in part that the group did less together anyway than I had anticipated, but more so that its position and design precluded casual or serendipitous contact. Although the group did meet for its weekly Plenum and the odd planned event, it was striking that the group very rarely eats together – an activity that is both symbolic of and at the heart of sharing as the core socio-spatial practice of cohousing (Jarvis, 2011) and is emphasized in all of the advocate literature. When LAiC did come together for a meal one evening in the common room, in the closing weeks of my field work, I was struck by how many of the group talked to me about it afterwards, the obvious pleasure each had found in the act. But reflecting on the picture of LAiC's social existence as a whole, I began to wonder whether to some extent use of the space was less important to the group, whether I had judged too much against the stricter definitions of the cohousing model at the expense of ignoring the group's real achievement and the benefit that its members continue to enjoy. LAiC represents proof that such a group can be created and maintained by a social framework despite a lack of the 'ideal' physical architecture – or indeed the processes of site finding, co-design and development. It suggests the possibility that the strictness of the cohousing model definitions in the case of older groups might be more flexible, or should at least be considered, in the light of potential retrofit schemes; and that the desired balance of privacy and sociability might vary among different groups.

The question of the social 'porosity' of LAiC's arrangement – the impact of having more intertwined neighbour relationships than might be the case with purpose-built cohousing – I would argue is a related but distinctly separate issue. In reviewing the data, it is clear that the case of the close friend of one of the group who was also an immediate neighbour to another

was the exception; in fact all other neighbour relationships were related to me as polite but distant, with minimal interaction in terms of the support or reciprocity considered here. Much of the local social interaction took the form of more self-conscious 'engagement', which is now fading and has apparently resulted in few if any strong friendship bonds. However, care is needed in transferring such findings to other situations: while the group very clearly followed a different route to the kind of cohousing projects critiqued by Chiodelli (2015a) and others as being gated communities, LAiC's membership is very different in terms of ethnicity, social class and family unit size to the large majority of the other residents, and the extent of social mixing in a more socially homogenous location may have been different. Nonetheless, the exception of the one neighbour/friend is perhaps instructive, in that the group did still maintain a strict boundary. While some felt that she might wish to join the group, all were agreed that she was not currently a member, and as such had not made the commitment to mutual support that others had.

The role of an older identity, negotiated as a group

While concepts such as Sandstedt and Westin's *Bund* might be a useful way to better understand the social structures of senior cohousing groups, my findings from LAiC also reveal the important role played by a specifically *older* group identity, and which represents a significantly different phenomenon from inter-generational cohousing. Individuals draw strength from membership of the group, and a group identity is enacted and strengthened through the time that members share together.

I represented this group identity as something that drew on different aspects, considered in Chapter 6 almost as separate themes, and which were closely related to aspects of motivations discussed in Chapter 5 – a shared generational identity, a shared acknowledgement of being a certain age for example. I also considered the practical aspect of incompatibility, evidenced by Group Two: older members, who are in a minority, feel that the younger members have a completely different focus, despite not having young children around, and that the group does not provide them with the sociability and structure that LAiC has, and that I witnessed when the group was out together (albeit not as often as in the past).

Yet in practice LAiC's shared identity was a product of all of these things. What I acknowledged less in considering the data was the important role of proximity as a group in tying these together; the members were not people without ties elsewhere, and likely had more in common with other close friends and family members, but the group identity was not just about a shared commitment, but being to enact a shared culture together on a daily basis. While less acknowledged in the senior cohousing literature, it is notable that McHugh (2007) draws on themes of ageing, generational identity and proximate community in a number of Arizona retirement communities to acknowledge that proximity and daily interaction of a group of generational peers was an essential aspect that '*... cements and sustains collective beliefs, values and identities*'.

My experience of the group when out with them was always a positive one, and it seemed largely to illustrate the benefits of a kind of group camaraderie and sense of a 'gang' when together. Some expressed to me in private what the group meant to them in more profound terms: Tina for instance about how she drew strength and self-confidence from the group that made her feel more comfortable now than in her earlier life. It seems much removed from a third age construction of identity as one that implicitly rejects those less 'successful' in the field of ageing, or an avoidance of the negative aspects of ageing. The lives of the LAiC members seem entirely different to those in the studies by Degnen (2007), Roth *et al.* (2012) and Hurd (1999) considered in Chapter 2, and which portrayed small communities of older people as being as much defined by an idea of other older people who are not a part of the group, marked by their unsuitability. Each study explored how an 'othering' of those who were seen as ageing less successfully acted both to strengthen ties within the group, but also served as a tool for members of the group to disassociate themselves from 'older people'.

Yet there are echoes of this in LAiC members' attitudes toward both people known to the group (those 'floating voters' who were unable to commit to cohousing) and a wider imaginary of the 'right kind of person' for the group, a logical extension of the idea that it takes a 'certain kind of person' and a group imaginary of someone 'young in mind' irrespective of chronological age. It is mirrored by the sometimes conscious rejection of how living as 'old people' might, e.g. the residents in the block where John and Roger have relocated, while maintaining they belong socially to LAiC, and in turn echoes Hurd's observations of a community of older people '*...*

seeking to distance themselves from the category of 'old' and its associated stereotypes' (Hurd, 1999: 419).

The group's commitment to local engagement could also be seen in this light, that as in Hurd's study, the group seeks to create an identity supportive of the group through activity that sets its members apart from those who do not engage, who are seen not to be trying. In the literature on the subject, this third age negotiation is often framed in a negative light, a social process of denial. But in their behaviour as a group, LAiC is perhaps more comparable with Arlie Hochschild's study of a community of older women living together in the 1960s, or even Laura Hurd's study of an older community of the 1990s (Hochschild, 1973; Hurd, 1999), discussed in Chapter 2. Both portray groups struggling to exist as something other than the stereotypes of 'old people' bestowed on them by an ageist society but to differing extents powerless in the face of bureaucracies and wider society. To differing extents the residents in each study draw strength and support from membership of their respective groups, and in doing so opens up a space for other identities to flourish, even if those are not recognised beyond the groups themselves.

LAiC members seem less embattled than Hochschild's participants, less consciously working at the denial of 'old age' than Hurd's. Yet while the status of older people, buoyed by the cultural 'movement' of the third age, may have changed in many ways, it has been argued that wider cultural attitudes around ageing in western society, although perhaps more progressive than a generation ago, continue to regard later life (for most) as a period inextricably linked to dependence, mental and physical decline (Binstock, 2010; Baars, 2012; North and Fiske, 2012). Gilleard and Higgs, for instance (2002; 2010), assert that structuralist approaches still fail to question the underlying assumption of later life as a period of social powerlessness and economic irrelevance for the majority of people, and that older people must continue to negotiate their lives in the context of state services and broader societal attitudes that continue to be deeply prejudiced against them.

Clearly, experience of life with LAiC suggests that such groups have something very positive to offer, that is distinct from other forms of cohousing. While there are aspects of 'othering' by the group that might have potentially negative impacts, and will be discussed below, LAiC's

experience also suggests that such groups might play an important role in bolstering the lives and identities of older people in a society that, despite a cultural shift around the issue, remains structurally ageist.

LAiC and members' changing priorities in later life

Chapters 6 and 7 both in part illustrate a withdrawal of LAiC's members into other spheres of their own lives, especially toward families and grandchildren. It is notable that in their discussion of the *Bund*, Sandstedt and Westin regard the artificial construct of cohousing for later life as not enduring by default, and that there: '*... is always instability and tendencies towards transformation [to] other types of relationships ...*'. (Sandstedt and Westin, 2015: 247). While inevitably any such group will begin to slow down and decrease its activities as members age, I interpreted the decrease in group events together – most notably the very last walking trip during my fieldwork, when I was the only person able to attend – as a kind of dissolution of the group. I assumed that the amount of activity the group did together (and that I was able to witness) related directly to the extent to which it actually existed.

A number of aspects and incidents from the group's life together fit with this picture of withdrawal from, and winding down of the group. I found it significant that the manifesto intention for LAiC to promote itself and the model has not been pursued, especially locally, and despite the core members having had strong connections to a small movement of senior cohousing in Berlin in the past, this seems to have long ended. With the exception of Alison at the conference I described, and her mentoring of the second local group in the process of building on the estate, LAiC members were absent from the many networking events I took part in through 2017. This is notably different from Jarvis's description (2012) of cohousing groups as tending to be '*well networked and well informed*'. At an individual level, outside of the world of cohousing, LAiC members are well connected and continue to socialise as a group. The notable difference, which I experienced at the local community centre, is that they avoid presenting themselves as a group to those that *know* them. I have argued that the picture overall does represent a shift from LAiC's original founding identity – aspects of which represent a third age resistance to 'old fashioned' ideas of ageing – to a position where no

longer being able or willing to pursue such aims has led to LAiC fading, to becoming less than it aimed to be. But does such withdrawal by members risk undermining the group altogether?

When I caught up with some of the members in the late summer of 2018, wondering if there had been a ‘regrouping’ as had been intended by Alison at the end of the previous year (described in Chapter 8), the event seemed forgotten. In fact Beth revealed to me that she and Janet, who jointly rent a summer house an hour or so outside the city, had decided to remain there throughout the summer, and thus stop attending the Plenum meetings, and I took this as a further sign of a continued slow process of dissipation.

Yet, reflecting on the group’s experience several months later, I found a different interpretation possible. While the group may not continue to exist indefinitely (and as will be discussed below in terms of succession), I may have overlooked the value of the group to each other – in the context of the framework – that continues and is not reliant on the amount of ‘structured’ time together. Certainly, individual priorities have changed, especially around the arrival of grandchildren, and some have found this frustrating. But perhaps LAiC continues to exist as a kind of community imaginary, as a *Bund*. Members express this when they talk about each other and how they feel: not always emotionally close, but there when needed.

Agency and the fourth age

Senior cohousing has perhaps most strongly been framed as an enactment of independence for older groups, one that aims to resist a potential loss of agency through social care and other social structures imposed on us in later life (*cf.* Brenton, 2001). While the model has never been intended as ersatz social care, it does aim to alleviate the need for the kind of formal social care that is in reality so often a response to a lack of individual social capital, of simply having no support networks of one’s own (Gray, 2014). However, I would argue that while the concept of senior cohousing has been one largely defined by third agers, there is little evidence of how such communities respond when a decline in health results in increased support needs.

Advocates of the model tend to emphasize the need for clear boundaries between the social support of the community and actual care, although Durrett (2009) notes that detailed

planning at a formative stage can be counter-productive, noting from case studies that there was often found to be far *greater* levels of voluntary help than had originally been imagined. Further, he notes how 'co-care on the fly' – the group making decisions about care when the need actually arose – had also been found to work. One especially notable point drawn from case examples was not about members caring for others directly, but the degree of support and influence the group was able to have on care facilities where a member with dementia was being cared for; in short suggesting that the care provision beyond the group was improved because of the involvement of the members.

Of course, while none of the members of LAiC has yet crossed that 'event horizon' of the fourth age of loss of agency through chronic impairment or dementia (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010), it is important to acknowledge the significant mutual support that the group has represented for its members. Wendy's experience of practical support around her hip replacement operation is the most obvious example. Yet the group has also responded to its still-quoted aim to relieve the burden from families in several ways – which I have argued is a call for independence not only for children from their parents, but to maintain the independence of the parents from their children. In fact, at present it seems that many in the group help to lift a burden more than originally intended, through help with grandchildren, albeit this is done willingly.

Yet it emerged that for LAiC, aims of mutual care and reciprocity are complex, less straightforward in practice than the manifesto might suggest. While the group rallies around 'clear cut' immediate support needs such as Wendy's operation, there are hints elsewhere that while members are willing to give support, receiving support is resisted by many; it seems strongly connected to an unwillingness to admit to personal weakness, possibly most difficult for those who have been so strongly independent throughout lives of caregiving and support of others. Further, discussion of health issues as a group is avoided, in itself perhaps understandable as an avoidance of depressing 'health chat'. However, I argue that this position can prevent the group having deeper conversations that consider the bigger picture of decline for the group, despite a few members have begun to discuss this between themselves. There are echoes in this of Laura Hurd's (1999) study of a group of older people based around a community centre and their construction of a shared identity, it is interesting to compare LAiC's experience with her observation – and also Degnen (2007) – that signs of physical or

cognitive ageing are often avoided or ‘hidden’ by group members, as a way to maintain the appearance at least of staving off a fourth age.

Yet it could be asked what in fact LAiC might practically do in terms of future planning for as-yet unknown eventualities; as noted above in Durrett’s view, such forward thinking may be unnecessary. There is evidence though that at least some in the group – notably Alison – did feel that the group should begin to address the subject of their future in this context. On one hand a paradox arguably remains that a group so clear about ageing together in its stated aims (written at a formative stage) has struggled to acknowledge the vicissitudes of later life in practice. On the other, how issues of care and chronic conditions unfold and the accompanying demands that these place on the group remain to be seen, and may both impact and depend on how coherent as a group LAiC remains in the future.

The challenge of succession

While the question of group longevity has been raised as an issue (Andresen and Runge, 2002) it is also acknowledged as one that has been little investigated (Labit, 2015). While the question of whether the LAiC group might survive its original membership and continue in the long term was not a specific question that I began with, it did arise in thinking about who the group found acceptable as new members, and later with the realisation that recruitment had in any case ceased.

As I noted in Chapter 5 that the average age of LAiC members has risen in line with the years since formation, i.e. after ten years together, the average age has risen by roughly the same. While new members have been added throughout this time, it is clear that if LAiC wished to continue beyond its current membership in the future, it would have to recruit younger members. I perceived that one barrier has been the strong group imaginary, that has resulted in a rejection of those who are not ‘the right kind of person’, i.e. that the group perceives as having an appropriately ‘youthful’ attitude to life, and an ability to adapt and change their lives. There was some truth in this latter aspect: I met several people, often well-liked by the group, who I could see would be unlikely to organise their lives sufficiently to make such a commitment. I should also acknowledge that it is inherent in the whole concept of cohousing

that a group selects its members as suitable; it is unreasonable to expect that potential members should be allowed to join who are not deemed acceptable by the group.

But is it not the case though that LAiC should have prioritised younger over those who they identified as most suitable? There was an extent to which the group's interpretation of consensus played a role here: some members, possibly a majority, were against a proposal only to allow new members who were under 65. But this reflected an underlying issue: that the strength of the group identity, tied closely to a particular generation and cohort, meaning that members might have to 'reach out' beyond their comfort zone to people in their fifties and early sixties, a different generation with whom they might feel little in common. The problem is noted in a qualitative study of older people's intentional communities in Australia (Rogers, 2014), in which the author relates a newer resident's dismay at the attitude of the older founder members:

[...] 'there is them and us ... they like the thought of shared experiences and not having to put up with younger people' (A). This concern was expressed by 'A' as she could see herself being the "... last person standing doing the organic gardening."

But in fact the problem may be as much, or greater, from the perspective of applicants. As one member noted, there had been few applicants, and queried who anyway in their fifties might want to join a group in their seventies and eighties? It seems probable that if it were LAiC's intention to expand to new membership, the best opportunity for doing so may have been missed. On reflection, I may have missed an unspoken question for the group: of whether, given the obvious stress and disruption of recruiting members, whether sustainability of the group is valued above the benefits that it enjoys in the present. While succession clearly is a key issue for the long-term future of the senior cohousing model, forming a consensus about how this may be achieved in practice has been a challenge for LAiC are consequently they are an example perhaps more than other groups of the problem of a single ageing cohort that has recruited few younger members. It should be recognised that the impetus to continually regenerate a group is not so easily responded to.

9.4 Close

Since my initial curiosity about the senior cohousing group opposite my block in Berlin several years ago, I have come to realise that the lived experience is more complex, and hugely more challenging than I might have imagined. To live in senior cohousing probably does take a ‘certain kind of person’, and is unlikely to be comparable to the experience of living with close family or even friends. Yet the model represents a potential for something of enormous value for those who might choose it, and with the right support in the UK could be made much easier to achieve, and to scale up, in many different forms.

While issues such as succession remain a concern within the framing I have chosen for this research, it is also important to reflect on and appreciate how much LAiC has achieved, as a pioneering and mutually supportive community that continues to offer its members a framework of companionship available to few people in later life. As I concluded my fieldwork with a final catch-up with some of the members late in 2017, the overriding topic of conversation was not griping about problems, but excitement around annual plans to spend New Year together on Germany’s north coast.

9.5 Reflections on my research approach

The place of ethnographic methods

I have already reflected in Chapter 3 on the limitations of the ethnographic approach that I originally intended, and that while it was the interviews themselves which gave the much larger part of the material I have drawn on, being around the group – spending days out or at events with members and so on – helped me to get to know the group and gain trust. More importantly, I was able to develop lines of enquiry from such observation and follow these up in later interviews. At the same time, the difficulty in negotiating a closer research relationship with the group also helped me to better observe how there was considerably less time LAiC spent together as a group than I had expected, revealing a picture of a community whose members increasingly led lives focussed elsewhere.

But the experience with all three groups has led me to reflect on the nature of all cohousing communities, whose principle of sharing facilities but also living in separate homes is also a reflection of a greater separation of *lives*, than might be the case in arrangements such as communes. While I would maintain the approach of mixed ethnography and interviews in future comparable research, I also recognise that senior cohousing might sometimes be a different proposition to the close communities related in studies such as Arlie Hochschild's *Unexpected Community* of the late 1960s; that lives that come together in the realm of the cohousing group might for much of the time be quite separate.

Insider / outsider status: a difference in age, or other differences?

I also reflected in Chapter 3 on the difficulties of exploring age and ageing with older people themselves, and the importance of building on commonalities, of avoiding asking direct questions about the experience of 'being old' when this is likely to have little meaning to older people themselves. My primary concern, I recall, was that in fact the stigma associated with aspects of old age and the aspirations of the Berlin groups might result in individuals' rejection of being recognised as older at all. Certainly, one less successful interview that I undertook with the group's oldest member, 76, as he (a retired professor of psychology) crossly denied

that age was at all relevant to his joining the group, or even to his life more generally. We discussed German politics and history for two hours before he returned more readily to the topic.

But at LAiC, whose members had admittedly joined a group explicit about being older, there was much less sensitivity around being older per se. Alison, Beth and others in the group were very reflective on the issue of changing self-perception as they grew older, and always happy to discuss the theme. That is not to say certain subjects were not sensitive, and as I have previously discussed, issues of health, care and the fourth age were difficult to deal with by members between each other; I remained mindful that the experience of various chronic conditions, more frequent illness and hospital visits, is part of a life stage-state of mind that it is difficult to relate to someone who has not experienced this. At the same time, I sensed (and in fact Alison told me) that to the group, there was a clear difference between what they felt a person in their 40s might understand in comparison with someone in their late 20s.

A greater issue was gender, both at LAiC but also in the (mainly female) members of other groups that I interviewed or met with. Following the discussion evening described in Chapter 6 (6.3), Alison, commenting on the awkwardness of the event reminded me that: *'...however old we get, a group of women will always behave differently if there's a man in the group than we do together'*. While on one hand I was able to draw on the 'betweenness' that Tarrant (2016) described in her own research with older men, building on commonalities rather than difference, it remained at times a difficult difference to bridge. Although some members – Alison and Beth again primarily – seemed open and both noted that they discussed issues differently with me than they might with men of their own generation, there were others that I felt were much more reticent in this way.

These are matters however of how the group members responded to me, or the relationships between us. It is also necessary to reflect on my own position in terms of my attentiveness to different issues and the themes I chose to follow. Of my observation of that same incident (Chapter 6), that older people seeming to think more deeply about different life stages, my wife in turn observed that perhaps it was more that women tend to reflect more on such issues than men throughout their lives; that men seem to 'move through life in a single state, with

little reflection'. Although there is much to be explored around communities of older people and their negotiation of later life from different perspectives, there is no doubt that the subject (and ageing more generally) will remain highly gendered, and I acknowledge should be addressed more deeply in such research.

9.6 Future research

Given the increasing interest in the field of senior cohousing and the relatively small range of literature, there are numerous potential avenues for further research, not least in the context of societal ageing and the rising social care crisis in Britain. In this final section I briefly consider how some of the key themes considered in this thesis might be further investigated, with a view to informing policy initiatives that respond to the challenges and further potential of the senior cohousing model in the UK.

The first of these might be framed as a question of how a balance is maintained for members between the life of the group – a group identity and the possibility of an independent life within it – and members social connections outside the group, in particular family members. How might issues around poor health, especially conditions such as dementia, be negotiated around between the group on one hand and members' families, assumed to mostly be adult children? Conversely, where a member does not have children or close family – as has been noted to be typically more the case (Labit, 2015) – what role might a senior cohousing group play? Issues of succession and property ownership are also closely related to such questions, i.e. if family or others not in the group inherit a member's home that is part of the development, or the status of a home if a member has to move to care accommodation elsewhere.

The potential to explore such questions in the UK remains restricted due to the lack of fully-established groups: the OWCH Research Collective (including the Older Women's Cohousing group and the LSE) has already begun a longitudinal study of their own (Pareja-Eastaway, 2017), although there are a number of groups progressing, including Cannock Mill Cohousing, with whom I have strong contacts and who are likely to move in this year (2019). However, more fruitful would be to identify further groups in Germany or other North European countries for further qualitative research focussing on these particular questions.

A second framing of these questions might be to examine the role of the size of the groups and their age range in terms of social sustainability and succession. It is notable from the surveys and studies referenced earlier, as well as my own anecdotal experience of several groups including OWCH, that groups tend to range from slightly to significantly larger in numbers than LAiC; in my conversations with other forming groups in Berlin, the UK and elsewhere, age range has also been acknowledged as something important to address, but the application of this in practice seems not fully understood. It might be possible to identify and compare a sample of established groups that reflect these size and age ranges, based on succession surveys. Quantitative data for groups does exist, although patchy, in most countries (see for instance Fedrowitz and Matzke, 2013, for Germany) as a basis for identifying groups.

From another perspective entirely, the possibilities of the retrofit model also open up potentially other existing communities whose experience could be learned from in the UK. The example noted in Chapter 2 – of a small housing co-operative established in two terraced streets in south London (Forrest, 2013) whose ageing members have in effect reorganised as a cohousing project – is a reminder that Britain has a long and substantial tradition of co-operative housing and that remains numerically significant in the overall picture of the country's housing, while also often remaining rooted in existing communities (Thompson, 2018). It would be to revisit the themes explored in this thesis in the context of such groups, and in the case of the London example noted, how housing communities that did not originally intend to address ageing as an issue have dealt with their members' changing lives and identities, and are now negotiating issues such as mutual care. It may be that there is a potential for such groups as significant as 'formal' senior cohousing projects that might similarly warrant the support of social policy in the context of an ageing population.

Appendix A: Key data collection

Between March and November 2017 I lived full-time in Berlin. Prior to this I had some initial contact with members of LAiC and Group One; I retained further contact with all three groups during 2018. See Section 3.3 for a description of each group.

A summary of interviews is given below. All semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. Not reflected here, as is the nature of an ethnographic approach, is the large amount of data collected primarily with LAiC, but also with other groups, on groups trips, meals together, informal chats at events and other serendipitous meetings.

LAiC

Member	Data Collection
Alison	Three semi-structured interviews
My primary contact	Regular unstructured one-to-one conversations
Roger	Two semi-structured interviews
LAiC record keeper	
John	Declined formal interview, but spoke on numerous occasions including my first contact with the group (with Alison)
Janet	Two semi-structured interviews
Tina	Two semi-structured interviews
Jill	Two semi-structured interviews
Wendy	Two semi- structured interviews
Amanda	Two semi-structured interviews
Pauline	Two semi-structured interviews
Rosie	Two semi-structured interviews
Beth	Two semi-structured interviews Several other unstructured conversations and meetings
Judith	Two semi-structured interviews
Clive	Two semi-structured interviews
'Associate Member' ³¹	One semi-structured interview

³¹ a former group member who lives in Berlin, continues as an 'associate' member, but declined to move to LAiC's location when they moved in.

Group One

In total I interviewed six of the eight members:

Participant 1	Female, single	One semi-structured interview
Participant 2	Female, married	One semi-structured interview
Participant 3	Male, married Lead member Architect of the group	One semi-structured interview Several less formal conversations My original contact in the group since 2012
Participant 4	Female, recently widowed	One semi-structured interview
Participant 5	Couple: male, female.	One semi-structured joint interview
Participant 6		Skype to USA

Group Two

In total I interviewed eight of the ten members, and one member of an adjacent multi-generational cohousing group, and a close friend of the group. I also had additional informal contact and dinner with most of the group.

Participant 1	Female, married Founder member of group		Two semi-structured interviews, plus Several less formal conversations
Participant 2	Couple:	Male	Two semi-structured joint interviews (with wife)
Participant 3		Female	Two semi-structured joint interviews (with husband) Several less formal conversations
Participant 4	Female, single		One semi-structured interview One less formal conversation
Participant 5	Female, single		Two semi-structured interviews
Participant 6	Female, married		One semi-structured interview
Participant 7	Couple:	Female	Two semi-structured interviews (one joint with husband)

Participant 8		Male	One semi-structured interview (joint with wife, above)
Participant 9: <i>adjoining group</i>	Female, single Close friend of the group		One semi-structured interview

Members of other groups

Interviews and contact with other members of other groups, mainly in process of forming. Each interviewed once. All structured.

Participant 1	Female	Member of several groups in formation
Participant 2	Female	Lead member of the group developing new project on same estate as LAiC
Participant 3	Female	Member of the group above
Participant 4	Female	Member of the '+-60' senior cohousing project - in formation
Participant 5	Female	Older member of inter-generational cohousing group (referred to in Section 6.3)
Participant 6	Male	Founder member of a self-build cohousing group established in the early 1980s, Kreuzberg, West Berlin

Appendix B: Ethical Approval

**UCL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
ACADEMIC SERVICES**



31st March 2017

Dr Russell Hitchings
Department of Geography
UCL

Dear Dr Hitchings

Notification of Ethical Approval

Re: Ethics Application 9729/001: Mutual support in later life. Enacting ageing identity in senior co-housing communities

I am pleased to confirm in my capacity as Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee that I have ethically approved your study until **31st March 2018**.

Approval is subject to the following conditions:

Notification of Amendments to the Research

You must seek Chair's approval for proposed amendments (to include extensions to the duration of the project) to the research for which this approval has been given. Ethical approval is specific to this project and must not be treated as applicable to research of a similar nature. Each research project is reviewed separately and if there are significant changes to the research protocol you should seek confirmation of continued ethical approval by completing the 'Amendment Approval Request Form':

<http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/responsibilities.php>

Adverse Event Reporting – Serious and Non-Serious

It is your responsibility to report to the Committee any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to participants or others. The Ethics Committee should be notified of all serious adverse events via the Ethics Committee Administrator (ethics@ucl.ac.uk) immediately the incident occurs. Where the adverse incident is unexpected and serious, the Chair or Vice-Chair will decide whether the study should be terminated pending the opinion of an independent expert. For non-serious adverse events the Chair or Vice-Chair of the Ethics Committee should again be notified via the Ethics Committee Administrator within ten days of the incident occurring and provide a full written report that should include any amendments to the participant information sheet and study protocol. The Chair or Vice-Chair will confirm that the incident is non-serious and report to the Committee at the next meeting. The final view of the Committee will be communicated to you.

Final Report

At the end of the data collection element of your research we ask that you submit a very brief report (1-2 paragraphs will suffice) which includes in particular issues relating to the ethical implications of the research i.e. issues obtaining consent, participants withdrawing from the research, confidentiality, protection of participants from physical and mental harm etc.

Academic Services, 1-19 Torrington Place (9th Floor),
University College London
Tel: +44 (0)20 3108 8216
Email: ethics@ucl.ac.uk
<http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/>

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Lynn Ang', is displayed within a light blue rectangular box. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Lynn' and the last name 'Ang' clearly legible.

Dr Lynn Ang
Interim Chair, UCL Research Ethics Committee

Cc: James Hudson

Appendix C: Participant information & consent form

The following written description of my study (in German) was given to all participants, and the accompanying (German) consent form signed.

Participant Information (German)

Teilnahme an einer Studie: Cohousing-Projekte älterer Menschen: von Erfahrungen in Deutschland lernen

Ich bin Doktorand am University College London und interessiere mich schon seit langem für Wohnprojekte, insbesondere für Cohousing-Projekte älterer Menschen. Im Rahmen meiner Doktorarbeit gehe ich der Frage nach, was Großbritannien möglicherweise von derartigen in anderen Ländern bestehenden Projekten und Gruppen lernen könnte.

Bis Oktober 2017 lebe ich in Berlin. In dieser Zeit möchte ich tiefgehende Gespräche mit einigen Gruppen führen und die einzelnen Beteiligten kennen lernen und erfahren, wie ihr Interesse am gemeinsamen Wohnen entstand und wie das Zusammenleben in der Praxis aussieht. Ich bin daran interessiert, so viele Menschen wie möglich zu treffen und mit ihnen zu sprechen, aber auch daran, an Gemeinschaftsveranstaltungen teilzunehmen – selbstverständlich unter der Voraussetzung, dass Sie und die anderen Gruppenmitglieder damit einverstanden sind.

Ich würde mich gern in einem zwanglosen Rahmen mit so vielen Gruppenmitgliedern wie möglich treffen, über meine Forschungsarbeit sprechen und alle Fragen beantworten, die aus Ihrer Sicht vor einer Teilnahme an meiner Studie geklärt werden sollten. Die Teilnahme ist selbstverständlich absolut freiwillig. Sie können Ihre Teilnahme jederzeit abbrechen, wenn Sie möchten.

Kontakt Daten

Ich schreibe meine Doktorarbeit am University College London, Department of Geography, Pearson Building, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT.

james.hudson.40@ucl.ac.uk

Forschungsleiter ist Dr. Russell Hitchings. Bei weiteren Fragen können Sie sich auch an ihn unter r.hitchings.ucl@ac.uk wenden.

Einzelheiten zur Studie:

Zur Frage, inwieweit Cohousing – darunter auch Senior-Cohousing – in der Praxis funktioniert, liegen bislang nur vereinzelt Untersuchungen vor. Das gilt insbesondere für Großbritannien, wo erst relativ wenige derartige Projekte existieren. Einige Arbeiten befassen sich mit den praktischen und finanziellen Aspekten der Entwicklung von Cohousing-Projekten. Mein Schwerpunkt gilt jedoch eher sozialen

Fragestellungen wie der Motivation für die Teilnahme an solchen Projekten und den alltäglichen Erfahrungen beim Zusammenleben in einer Gruppe.

Ich hoffe, dass meine Studie, die das Kernstück meiner Doktorarbeit bildet, Cohousing-Gruppen und Entscheidungsträgern in Großbritannien als Informationsquelle dienen kann, jedoch auch für die übergreifende Cohousing-Bewegung eine Rolle spielen und zu einem besseren Verständnis dazu beitragen wird, was Zusammenwohnen für uns bedeuten kann, wenn wir älter werden, und möglicherweise eine Option für mehr Menschen darstellt.

Ich würde für meine Arbeit gerne Einzelgespräche mit allen Gruppenmitgliedern führen und an gemeinsamen Aktivitäten wie etwa Mahlzeiten oder Zusammenkünften teilnehmen. Wenn Sie mit einer Teilnahme an der Studie einverstanden sind, möchte ich Sie zu einem ersten informellen persönlichen, etwa einstündigen Gespräch einladen. Ich richte mich, was Zeitpunkt und Ort – bei Ihnen zu Hause oder an einem anderen Ort – angeht, gern nach Ihren Wünschen. Möglicherweise frage ich Sie bei der Gelegenheit auch, ob Sie einverstanden sind, zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt im Rahmen der Studie ein weiteres, etwa zweistündiges Einzelgespräch zu führen, das der Nachbereitung der Erkenntnisse aus der Forschungsarbeit dienen soll.

Als Daten für meine Forschung verwende ich Gesprächsaufzeichnungen und schriftliche Notizen. Diese Daten werde ich gemäß den geltenden deutschen und britischen Datenschutzbestimmungen auf sichere Weise speichern. Keine andere Person außer mir hat Zugriff auf diese Daten. Alle Daten werden anonymisiert, indem Namen und andere persönliche Informationen entfernt werden. Die Aufzeichnungen werden gelöscht, sobald Transkriptionen erstellt wurden.

Ich plane, die anonymisierten Daten zum Teil in meiner Doktorarbeit, in Berichten, die publiziert werden sollen, und in Präsentationen zu verwenden, um meine Arbeit vorzustellen. Bis ich meinen Abschlussbericht einreiche – das wird schätzungsweise Ende 2018 sein –, können Sie Ihr Einverständnis mit der Verwendung der anonymisierten Daten jederzeit zurückziehen. Mir sind Offenheit und Anwendung meiner Forschungsarbeit wichtig. Ich hoffe, sie nützt Ihrer Wohngruppe und der breiteren Cohousing-Bewegung.

Über mich

Ich bin von Hause aus Bauingenieur und habe in den 1990er und 2000er Jahren in den Bereichen Architektur und Bauwesen gearbeitet, hauptsächlich im öffentlichen Wohnungsbau. Ich schreibe außerdem seit einigen Jahren zu Architektur und ähnlichen Themen. Als ich nach Berlin zog, um hier einige Jahre lang zu leben, begann ich, mich eher für die sozialen Aspekte der Architektur und für alternative Wohnformen zu interessieren.

2015 führte ich eine Forschungsarbeit zu zwei Gruppen älterer Menschen in London durch, die eigene Cohousing-Konzepte entwickelten. Diese Arbeit wird Ende des Jahres als ein Kapitel in einem Buch über „alternative“, auf Gemeinschaft basierende Wohnformen veröffentlicht. Ich plane außerdem einen wissenschaftlichen Beitrag zum Thema Cohousing für ältere Menschen und seine Vorteile.

Von 2011 bis 2014 betrieb ich hier in Berlin zusammen mit meiner Frau eine englische Bäckerei mit Café, die wir 2014 vor unserer Rückkehr nach London verkauften.

Wenden Sie sich gern jederzeit bei Fragen direkt an mich oder an andere Gruppenmitglieder, zu denen ich Kontakt habe. Wenn Sie sich für eine Teilnahme entscheiden, erhalten Sie dieses Informationsblatt und werden aufgefordert, eine Einverständniserklärung zu unterzeichnen.

Vielen Dank!
Jim Hudson

Informed Consent Form (German)

Einverständniserklärung für Teilnehmer

Füllen Sie dieses Formular aus, nachdem Sie das Informationsblatt gelesen und/oder die Erläuterungen zu dieser Studie gehört haben.

Cohousing-Projekte älterer Menschen: von Erfahrungen in Deutschland lerne

Dies Studie wurde vom Forschungsethik-Ausschuss des University College London (Projekt-ID-Nummer: 9729/001) genehmigt.

Vielen Dank für Ihr Interesse an dieser Studie teilzunehmen. Die Person, die diese Studie organisiert, ist verpflichtet, Ihnen das Projekt zu erklären, bevor Sie Ihr Einverständnis erklären.

Wenn Sie Fragen im Zusammenhang mit dem Informationsblatt oder mit der Erklärung haben, die Ihnen bereits gegeben wurde, dann wenden Sie sich an den Organisator der Studie, bevor Sie sich für oder gegen eine Teilnahme entscheiden. Sie erhalten ein Exemplar dieses Einverständnisformulars, auf das Sie jederzeit zurückgreifen können, für Ihre Unterlagen.

Teilnehmererklärung

Ich,,

- habe die Hinweise oben und das Informationsblatt gelesen und verstehe, was zur Studie gehört.
- verstehe, dass ich die Person(en), die die Studie durchführen, benachrichtigen und meine Teilnahme sofort abbrechen kann, wenn ich zu irgendeinem Zeitpunkt entscheide, dass ich nicht mehr am Projekt teilnehmen möchte.
- stimme der Verarbeitung meiner persönlichen Daten für die Zwecke dieser Studie zu.
- verstehe, dass diese Informationen streng vertraulich und gemäß den in Großbritannien (*Data Protection Act 1998*) sowie den in Deutschland geltenden Datenschutzbestimmungen behandelt werden.
- erkläre, dass mir das oben genannte Forschungsprojekt zufrieden stellend erläutert wurde und ich mit der Teilnahme an der Studie einverstanden bin.
- erkläre mich damit einverstanden, dass meine nicht persönlichen Forschungsdaten von anderen Personen für künftige Forschungszwecke verwendet werden können. Ich verstehe, dass die Vertraulichkeit meiner persönlichen Daten durch die Entfernung von Identifikatoren gewahrt bleibt.
- verstehe, dass eine Audioaufzeichnung meiner Äußerungen erfolgt. Ich stimme der Verwendung dieses Material als Teil des Projekts zu.

- verstehe, dass die Informationen, die ich gegeben habe, im Rahmen einer Dissertation veröffentlicht werden. Auf Anfrage kann ein Exemplar der Dissertation zur Verfügung gestellt werden.
- verstehe, dass die Vertraulichkeit und Anonymität gewahrt bleibt und dass es nicht möglich ist, mich durch jegliche Veröffentlichungen zu identifizieren.

Unterschrift:

Datum:

Participant Information (English)

Taking part in research about cohousing, and what the UK might learn from German examples of older people's cohousing projects

I'm a PhD researcher from University College London with a long-term interest in cohousing, and a particular focus on groups of older people doing cohousing, and what the UK might be able to learn from established groups in other countries.

I'm living in Berlin until October this year, to give me time to talk to some groups in depth and get to know the individuals involved – what first interested you in the cohousing project and how it's working out in practice. I am therefore keen to meet as many people as possible to do some interviews, but also come along to some of the group's social events, obviously with the consent of you and the members of the group.

I am keen to meet informally with as many members of the group as possible, to discuss the research and so that you can ask any questions to help decide if you'd like to take part. Obviously, participation is entirely voluntary, and if you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time.

Contact details:

My PhD is based at University College London, Department of Geography, Pearson Building, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT.

james.hudson.40@ucl.ac.uk

The principal researcher is Dr Russell Hitchings, who can also be contacted if you have further queries, at r.hitchings.ucl.ac.uk.

Details of the study:

There has been very little research about how cohousing – including senior cohousing – actually works in practice, especially in the UK where relatively few projects have been established so far. Although there are several studies that look at the practical and financial challenges of developing cohousing projects, I hope to focus on the social dimensions – the motivations for joining such groups, expectations and the everyday experience of living together as a group.

I hope that the study, which will form the heart of my PhD project, will help to inform cohousing groups and policy makers in the UK, but also the wider cohousing movement in building a greater understanding of what cohousing might offer more of us as we grow older.

As part of the study, I hope to undertake one-on-one interviews with the members of each group, but also to spend time with the group during some of the common activities, such as meetings or shared meals. If you consent to participate, I would invite you to take part in an initial informal face-to-face interview, lasting around an hour, at a date and time that's convenient to you, and which could take place at your home or another location if you prefer. I might ask if you would agree to a further one-

on-one interview later in the research period, which would last up to two hours, as a chance for me to follow up on what I've learned during the research.

The data I collect will be in the form of recordings of our interview, together with written notes. All information will be stored securely, in compliance with both UK and German current data protection legislation – no one will have access to this data apart from me as the researcher. All data will be anonymised by removing your name and any other identifying personal information; recordings will be deleted as soon as they are written up.

I do plan to use parts of this anonymised data in my PhD thesis, as well as in published reports and presentations, in order to communicate my research. You may withdraw your permission to use such anonymised data any point until I submit my final report (estimated late 2018). I am keen to be open with my research and its use, and I hope that it might be useful to both your group and the wider cohousing movement.

About me

I was originally a building engineer, working in architecture and construction through the 1990s and 2000s, mainly in the public housing sector. I have also been writing about architecture and related themes for several years, but started to become interested in the social aspects of architecture and alternative forms of housing when I came to live in Berlin for a few years.

In 2015 I did a study of two groups of older people in London who were developing their own cohousing schemes, and this will be published in the UK later this year as a chapter in a book on 'alternative' / community-based housing. I also have an academic piece forthcoming about senior cohousing and what it might offer.

Between 2011 and 2014, I also ran an English bakery and café here in Berlin, with my wife (which we sold in 2014 before returning to London).

Please let me know if you have any queries, either directly or through other members of the group who I'm in contact with. If you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep, and be asked to sign a consent form.

Many thanks,
Jim Hudson

Informed Consent Form (English)

Informed Consent Form for Participants

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/ or listened to an explanation about the research.

Cohousing for older people: learning from German examples

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Project ID Number): 9729/001.

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part, the person organising the research must explain the project to you.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you to decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Participant's Statement

I

- have read the notes written above and the Information Sheet, and understand what the study involves.
- understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and withdraw immediately.
- consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study.
- understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.
- agree that my non-personal research data may be used by others for future research. I am assured that the confidentiality of my personal data will be upheld through the removal of identifiers.
- understand that my participation will be audio recorded and I consent to use of this material as part of the project.
- understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a PhD dissertation, a copy of which can be made available if requested.
- Understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications

Signed:

Date:

Appendix D: Original Manifesto (German text)

Ökologisch

Durch gemeinsame Nutzung von Räumen, Geräten, Auto etc. wird zum Vorteil der Umwelt der individuelle Ressourcenverbrauch verringert. Die Mitglieder der Wohngruppe verpflichten sich zum sparsamen Umgang mit Wasser und Energie.

Kostengünstig

Wir möchten in für uns bezahlbaren Mietwohnungen leben und werden Lebenshaltungskosten durch gemeinsame Nutzung von Geräten u.ä. teilen und damit reduzieren.

Entlastend für Angehörige

Unsere Wohnform entlastet die Angehörigen, die uns in der Gruppe nicht nur gut aufgehoben wissen, sondern auch die Gewissheit haben, dass wir am Leben in einer zuverlässigen Gemeinschaft aktiv teilnehmen.

Vorteilhaft für Vermieter

Der Vermieter gewinnt mit einer Wohngruppe eine beständige, stabile Mieterschaft mit geringer Fluktuation. Sein Verwaltungsaufwand wird durch die Selbstorganisation der Gruppe in den gemieteten Wohnungen verringert, da sie ihr Zusammenleben selbst regelt, auch bei Konflikten, und z.B. Nachmieter selbst sucht. Die Wohngruppe strahlt positiv in die Wohnumgebung aus.

Generationen übergreifend

Selbstbestimmtes Wohnen im Alter bedeutet, dass man früh genug anfängt zu überlegen, wie und mit wem man seine letzten Jahre verbringen will. MancheR meint, es sei "noch nicht so weit"; jedoch: Wenn es "so weit ist", ist es meist zu spät.

Was wir wollen, fasst ein Text aus den Bekenntnissen des Augustinus (354-430 n.Chr.) treffend zusammen:

MITEINANDER REDEN UND LACHEN
SICH GEGENSEITIG GEFÄLLIGKEITEN
ERWEISEN
ZUSAMMEN SCHÖNE BÜCHER LESEN
SICH NECKEN DABEI ABER AUCH
EINANDER SICH ACHTUNG ERWEISEN
MITUNTER SICH AUCH STREITEN OHNE HASS SO
WIE MAN ES WOHL EINMAL MIT SICH SELBST
TUT
MANCHMAL AUCH IN DEN MEINUNGEN
AUSEINANDERGEHEN
UND DAMIT DIE EINTRACHT WÜRZEN
EINANDER BELEHREN UND VONEINANDER
LERNEN
DIE ABWESENDEN SCHMERZLICH VERMISSEN
DIE ANKOMMENDEN FREUDIG BEGRÜSSEN
LAUTER ZEICHEN DER LIEBE UND GEGENLIEBE
DIE AUS DEM HERZEN KOMMEN
SICH ÄUSSERN IN MIENE WORT
UND TAUSEND FREUNDLICHEN GESTEN
UND WIE ZÜNDSTOFF DEN GEIST
IN GEMEINSAMKEIT ENTFLAMMEN
SO DASS AUS DEN VIELEN EINE EINHEIT WIRD.

(Stand: 18.10.2004)

Wohnprojektgruppe

schaft



Kontakt:

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Wir sind eine Gruppe von derzeit (September 2004) 11 Frauen und Männern im Alter von 54 - 70 Jahren aus der ganzen Bundesrepublik, die Generationen übergreifendes gemeinschaftliches Miet-Wohnen in Berlin anstreben. Dabei möchte jedeR in einer eigenen Wohnung in einer Hausgemeinschaft mit einem gemeinschaftlich genutzten Bereich leben.

Wir sind entstanden nach dem Modell des Dresdener Vereins [REDACTED], einer ökumenischen Zeitschrift kritischer Christen, vorgestellt worden war.

Überwiegend christlich geprägt sind wir offen für Menschen mit unterschiedlichen Lebensformen und Weltanschauungen. Wir wollen ein achtsames, ökologisch nachhaltiges Leben mit sozialem Engagement führen.

Für die geplante Hausgemeinschaft sind uns folgende Eigenschaften wichtig:

Gemeinsam

Das angestrebte gemeinschaftliche Wohnen unterscheidet sich von Einzelwohnen und anderen Wohnformen wie betreutes Wohnen, Service-wohnen, Seniorenresidenzen u.ä. vor allem durch ein Gemeinschaftsleben, das über informelle Nachbarschaftskontakte hinausgeht, und die damit zusammenhängenden organisatorischen Lösungen, z.B. Eigeninitiative, Selbstverwaltung, Beteiligung bei der Gestaltung des Gemeinschaftslebens.

Uns ist neben der Rückzugsmöglichkeit in die eigene Wohnung eine gemeinschaftliche Lebensform wichtig. Dazu dienen Gemeinschaftsräume, regelmäßige verbindliche Treffen und gemeinsame Unternehmungen. Wir planen eine selbstge-

wählte Nachbarschaft, die sich in einem längeren Vorbereitungsprozess zusammen gefunden hat und die o.g. Ziele teilt. Wir schätzen den Anregeungsgehalt gemeinschaftlichen Lebens und wollen es, auch im zunehmenden Alter, aktiv und nicht "betreut" gestalten. "Hausgemeinschaften sind Ideenschmieden - Orte, die jeden zum Ausleben seiner Kreativität einladen" (D. Fuchs/ J. Orth, Umzug in ein neues Leben). Man wird gebraucht und nicht (nur) versorgt. Die vorhandenen individuellen Fähigkeiten der Bewohner werden sinnvoll eingesetzt.

[rearranged quite a bit here] Im Gegensatz zu betreutem Wohnen, Service-Wohnen o.ä. wollen wir uns bei Bedarf selbst gegenseitig unterstützen, auch wenn die Wohnung zeitweise oder länger nicht verlassen werden kann. Nach dem Motto "Nicht allein und nicht ins Heim" wollen wir - wenn Hilfe unter einander nicht ausreicht, auch mit selbst gewählten ambulanten Pflegediensten - eine Heimunterbringung nach Möglichkeit verhindern.

Wir möchten durch gemeinsame Lebensweise Vereinsamung vermeiden und so zum Erhalt unserer psychischen und physischen Gesundheit beitragen, so wie es wissenschaftliche Studien belegen.

Im Gegensatz zum Leben in einer Einzelwohnung schätzen wir die Geborgenheit und Sicherheit in der Hausgemeinschaft; es kann nicht geschehen, dass plötzlich auftretende Krankheit unbemerkt bleibt und durch ausbleibende Hilfe schwerwiegende Folgen eintreten.

Durch die Aktivierung wechselseitiger Hilfeleistungen werden Betreuungs- und Pflegekosten gespart.

Eigenständig

Wir möchten sowohl unser gemeinschaftliches als auch unser individuelles Leben selbstbestimmt bis ins hohe Alter gestalten.

Wir möchten in Wohnungen - nicht Einzelzimmern leben, in die wir uns zurückziehen können. Alleinsein ist möglich, ohne dass man es zu fürchten braucht. Im Gegensatz zu Wohnen im Heim und betreutem Wohnen vermeidet unsere selbständige Lebensform ohne vorgegebenen Tagesablauf, Betreuungsvertrag oder -pauschale unnötige Abhängigkeit.

Politisch-sozial engagiert

In Rio de Janeiro unterschrieben 1992 170 Staaten die Agenda 21, ein Handlungsprogramm für das 21. Jahrhundert mit dem Ziel der Integration ökonomischer, ökologischer und sozialer Belange weltweit. Durch die jeweilige lokale Agenda 21 soll vor Ort "Nachhaltigkeit" auf allen Ebenen umgesetzt werden in Zusammenarbeit der kommunalen Verwaltung mit aktiven Bürgern, Gruppen, Vereinen, Initiativen, d.h. gefördert werden soll, was dauerhaft Zukunft hat. [*similarities hereon, but quite different overall*] Angesichts der demographischen Entwicklung werden in absehbarer Zeit die derzeitigen Modelle der Betreuung Älterer durch Pflegeeinrichtungen unbezahlbar werden. Unsere Gruppe stellt sich in den Rahmen eines innovativen wohnpolitischen Konzepts, das auf Selbsthilfe und Selbstorganisation basiert; das Modell verringert die gesellschaftlichen Kosten als Alternative zu teurer herkömmlicher institutioneller Pflege und will ein Bewusstsein dafür in den Kommunen durchsetzen. - Wir werden uns im zukünftigen Wohngebiet sozial-verantwortlich engagieren.

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